MARIGOLD'S WINTER

Edith Ferris Foster

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MARIGOLD'S WINTER

"SHE MOVED THE LITTLE WET HANDKERCHIEF JUST ENOUGH TO STEAL A TIMID GLANCE AT HIM."

(*See page 206*)

MARIGOLD'S WINTER

By EDITH FRANCIS FOSTER

Author of "Mary 'n' Mary," "Marigold," "Jimmy Crow," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR

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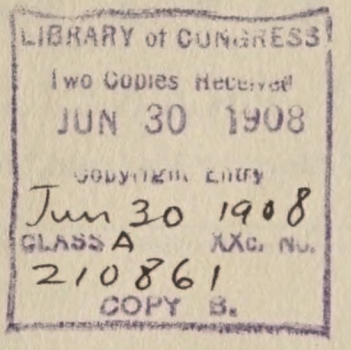

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MARIGOLD'S WINTER

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To the humble voyagers

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MARIGOLD'S WINTER

CHAPTER I

WHY NOT LET'S SKATE?

"AND I can't and I won't! and I think Mademoiselle is mean!" said Marigold.

Marigold was in the middle — she usually was in the middle, because all the girls liked to be next to her.

Mary came next on one side, — because Mary always was next to her beloved "twin," no matter where they might be. Neither of them would have allowed any other arrangement.

Dorothy was on the other side, and Anna and Gladys formed the right and left wings.

Five abreast is a good many for a city sidewalk — five little girls in a row.

It was well that the sidewalk was a broad one, for five small maidens (eleven years, going on twelve), with arms interlocked, fluttering and skipping to keep in step, and chattering so busily that they forget to look where they are going, take up a good deal of room, even on a broad and handsome city street.

But nobody seemed to mind — not even the people who had to turn out for them. They glanced kindly at the little maids as they passed, and some of them smiled — they could not help it, the children made such a pretty picture, their faces, rosy with the keen, clear, winter air, framed in flying curls, big hats, and fluffy furs.

It was the time of day when you were sure to meet flocks of little girls along that particular street — the hour when Madame Dupont's school closed for the day.

As they turned the corner into a street which ran along one side of the park, Marigold was still hotly expressing her very low opinion of her French teacher's way of conducting a recitation; but she changed the subject with funny abruptness; for not far inside the park railings was a little lake; and as she caught sight of the throng of skaters which blackened the first ice of the winter, the sentence which began petulantly with Mademoiselle's shortcomings ended in a cry of pleasure.

"Oh, look! Do let's go over and watch, just a minute. I do so love to see them skate!"

To the other girls the sight was not especially new or exciting, but to Marigold, though this was her second winter in the city, it was still a kind of fairyland.

She stood watching it, fascinated, her hands clasping the iron railings and her face pressed against them, just as she had sometimes stood, in the old days, more than a year ago, when she

was Mary Murray, gazing through the gates of the Meringtons' driveway at the " little fairy girl " and her fairy mother on the lawn. But now the little fairy girl stood beside her and was her sister.

" Oh, I wish I could skate ! " sighed Marigold.

" Why, can't you ? " asked Anna in surprise. " I thought you could do everything." (Anna admired Marigold immensely.)

" Not when I never had any skates, or anybody to teach me," answered Marigold absently, still gazing wistfully at the lively scene inside the fence; and Anna admitted that such a double difficulty might be too much for even Marigold.

" It's a pity you haven't any brothers," said Dorothy sympathetically. " My brother Gilbert has taken me twice this week."

" Or cousins — haven't you any cousins ? " asked Gladys, who was a new friend.

The others, after watching the fun for a few minutes, were ready to go on, and Anna was

stamping her cold feet impatiently; but Marigold still stood absorbed in the gay spectacle until presently she felt Mary pulling at her sleeve.

"Marigold! Wake up!" cried Mary, laughing. "That makes three times, and you don't hear a word I say. I have an idea!"

"What? What is it?" asked Marigold quickly, wide awake in a moment; for Mary's soft gray eyes were sparkling with pleasure over her idea.

"Why not let's learn to skate?" she said eagerly; and as Marigold looked hopeful but puzzled she added one word, as though that alone were quite explanation enough. "Dick!"

"Why-ee, yes!" agreed her twin with answering delight. "Why didn't we think of it before? *He* will teach us — of course he will!"

"And I know papa will get us some skates," Mary went on, "because he always likes us to be doing something out of doors. We will ask him to-night."

"And we can ask Dick the very first time he comes," added Marigold.

"Is Dick your cousin?" Gladys asked.

"No, he is our soldier," answered Mary simply. But Gladys looked as though that did not tell her much, and Marigold explained.

"He isn't any relation, really," she said; "but he always does everything we ask him to, so he is just as good as a brother."

"He's a great deal better!" said Anna rather sharply.

At the next corner the children parted, and Marigold and Mary went on alone, still chattering as busily and happily as before. Mary and Marigold were always good company for each other.

These two were not yet so used to being twin sisters as to forget (as little sisters, sad to say, sometimes do forget) what a very precious thing a sister is.

They had been twin sisters now for a year, but the happiness of the companionship was always new.

At the same time both of them fully believed that the adoption of Marigold by Mary Merington's parents had made them really "own" sisters like any other sisters — believed it so simply and entirely that it never occurred to them to explain to any one just how long they had been "twins."

So none of their playmates ever thought of it either; and Mary Murray was now to every one as she was to herself, Marigold Merington.

By wonderful good luck, as it seemed to the children, Dick Saunders came in that very evening, to return some borrowed books; and the twins fell upon him rapturously, as they always did.

It was almost true, as Marigold had said, that

Dick always did what they asked. He was to them something between a big brother and a young uncle; a person to be made much of and made free with — to be treated with a great deal of affection and not any respect at all.

It seemed a little odd, considering that they had known him less than two years since that dreadful day when they were lost in the Dark Swamp woods, and he had carried them home; but it only showed what a good fellow Dick was, and how fond he was of the little girls, that they should be so fond of him.

Mamma Merington liked Dick, too, and wished to be a helpful friend to him; so she had asked him to come and see them as often as he could. And Dick, who was of a friendly and social disposition, and who in spite of friends and acquaintances sometimes found it rather lonely, boarding in a great city, was glad to come as often as he felt he ought.

While he talked with mamma about the books she had lent him the children hovered around, not interrupting by a word; but Mary was pressing close against his arm, to be ready the moment opportunity offered, and whenever he met Marigold's eyes he saw them shining with joyful expectation. Evidently, thought Dick, something was up.

As soon as they were free to take possession of him, they carried him off gleefully to their favorite big chair, where one could perch on either arm while both talked to him at once.

That was the way they usually talked to him; and Dick always said it was the luckiest thing in the world that he had two ears, because he could use one for each of them.

In this duet fashion they laid their plan before him and Dick consented with the greatest readiness. He was not much more than a boy yet, and he had not had his own skates on for a year. The proposal pleased him.

"But it's only if you are *perfectly* willing — and if you have nothing else at *all* to do next Saturday," the children said, checking their eager planning with anxious politeness.

He reassured them on that point, and then he undertook to reassure their mother on another — the safety of the little lake, a few miles out of town, where he proposed to take them; for of course he scorned the tiny, overcrowded park lake.

That task was a little less easy; but Dick was now as eager for the frolic as the little girls themselves, and he pleaded their cause with enthusiasm.

He had played hockey all over that pond, he assured her earnestly, ever since he was a "little kid" (which perhaps seemed to Dick a longer period than it really was. He was only about twenty-two now).

Moreover, a large part of the pond was merely

overflowed meadow — the grass stuck right up through the ice — and if she wished they would promise to stay right in that part, "with the other kids."

So Dick coaxed and persuaded, and mamma (who was a little timid about water) sat looking in his boyish yet manly face with a smile that grew by degrees less doubtful and more consenting; while the twins overwhelmed her with their eager promises to be *so* careful, and do *just* what Dick told them, and to stay only *just* as long as she said they might.

At last mamma consented. There were a few conditions to her consent, however: as that the weather should be right, and the ice in perfectly safe condition (papa to be the judge on this point), that it should not be too much trouble for Dick, — and lastly and much the most serious, to Mary and Marigold at least, that Marigold's French recitations should decidedly improve before

Saturday came (Mademoiselle to be the judge here).

To this Marigold agreed meekly enough.

She had a bright and active mind, and as her step-mother, Mrs. Murray, used to say, " had not a lazy bone in her body."

She had always stood high in her classes at South Berket. But in such studies as were not taught in the Berket lower grades, she was of course far behind Mary; and it was the twins' one grief that on this account they had to be separated in some of their classes, and so could not always study and recite together.

Marigold had worked hard to make up this difference. She had supposed she was working as hard as she could; but with the prospect of a delightful reward just ahead she soon found out, and with her own frank honesty confessed, that she could work considerably harder.

Then Mary made a suggestion, quite simply and

seriously, which surprised and amused her sister very much.

Her proposal was that Marigold should like Mademoiselle, instead of "hating" her as at present.

Mary had an idea that this would make the French recitations easier as well as pleasanter.

At first Marigold stared and laughed at the funny notion that you could like anybody just because you made up your mind to; then she became charmed by the novelty of it; and ended by throwing herself into it with her usual energy and ardor.

In a little while it was Mademoiselle's turn to be charmed; and before the important Saturday arrived the effect of the fresh start was already so plain that the state of the weather was the only condition remaining in doubt.

Papa Merington's consent was easier to gain than mamma's, — for Mary had been quite

right in counting on his approval of any plan which promised wholesome, out-of-door exercise for his two small daughters.

One of those daughters was much rosier than the other, and the great desire of her father's heart was to see Mary's cheeks as firm and pink and her body as strong and active as Marigold's.

Already, in the winter and summer that had passed since "Mary Murray" became "Mary Golden Merington," a great improvement could be seen in the delicate little girl. The influence of the new sister's bolder spirit and gipsy love for out-of-doors had been of the greatest benefit; and any sort of play, even romping, that might help on this happy result was sure to be encouraged by papa.

CHAPTER II

UP DARLING RIVER

WITH minds at ease about the promised pleasure for next Saturday (Dick worked in Papa Merington's office down town, and was only free on Saturday afternoons), the three playmates returned to their arm chair and their chatter. The twins had not seen Dick for many days, and there were such a lot of things to talk over!

Papa and mamma were talking together, too, and papa was also trying at the same time to glance over the evening papers; but every few minutes the triple conversation in the easy chair by the fire grew softly explosive with merriment, and it was impossible not to listen to the fun.

The children were telling Dick now, it seemed, about some adventure of the past summer; and

Dick was finding plenty of use for both his ears.

"If *you* go with us," Marigold had said, with much satisfaction, "we'll be sure to be *per*fectly safe. We won't have such bad luck as we did the day we explored Darling River," and on Dick's expressing his ignorance of the geography of that stream, they both exclaimed and explained at once.

"Why, yes, you know! — the dear little brook at Berket, that comes down through our pine grove.

"We've always called it Darling River, — because there really is a Darling River, in the geography, and this is such a darling brook; but we never knew where it came from, and Marigold had always wanted awfully to find out.

"So last fall, after you and Rod had gone away, and papa hadn't come back from New York, we felt so lonesome we thought we'd better comfort ourselves by doing something special;

and that was the specialest thing we could think of — to explore Darling River and find the beginning of it.

" Oh, you can't think how pretty it was! We went 'way up through our pine grove to the stone wall where it's Mr. Burleigh's woods beyond. The river came right through the stone wall so we climbed over on top of it — because we were '*voyageurs*,' you know, so we had to go everywhere the river went, — that's exploring.

" Mr. Burleigh's woods are pine woods too, like ours, but they are thick and dark and solemn, not all spotty with sunshine as ours are; and the pine needles are so thick and soft on the ground you can't hear your feet when you step.

" So we were going along as still as mice, just listening to the quietness, when all at once, what do you think! There was a great whizz and whirr, as if something had burst, on the ground right in front of us, and then the thing flew off through

the trees, humming like a great big top. And we looked where the burst was, and there in front of our feet, as near us as that chair, was a nice little, round, smooth hole in the pine needles, about as big as the top of your hat. It was just at the foot of a big pine tree, — and *what* do you s'pose was in it? "

Dick couldn't guess! He wouldn't have guessed, and spoiled the pleasure of telling him, for the world.

" Thir-teen *eggs!* " cried both children at once. " Just like a dear little hen's nest! And they were all warm, and it was the little mother-hen partridge that burst up and flew off. Mamma says so.

" She didn't go very far, — she stopped in a patch of little, thin, low bushes, and kept running around and crying — sort of mewing, it sounded like — as if she were dreadfully frightened.

" We didn't go after her, for of course we wouldn't scare her any worse; so we sat down

near the nest and waited for her to come back. But we waited an *awful* long time, and she didn't come."

"Come back — and you sitting there! Well, I guess not!" Dick began to laugh, but checked himself and waited for the rest of it.

Papa was laughing too, quietly, behind his newspaper. They both knew something of the ways of partridges.

"Well, she wouldn't come back and she wouldn't go away," Marigold went on with businesslike briskness, "so at last we had to give it up, if we wanted to get to the beginning of the brook.

"We went through the pine woods, and then some other kind of woods; and then came a cleared, pasture place with gray, mossy rocks tumbled all about, like a flock of sheep lying down. And *there* we found the checkerberries! Oh, *just* as thick — you never *saw* checkerberries so thick.

"And there were blackberries, too, in the edge of the woods, — the tiny, seedsy ones, don't you know, that grow in shady places. So we thought that was a good place to have our picnic."

"Special picnic?" queried Dick. "I should say the whole affair was a good deal of a picnic, myself."

"Why, no," they corrected him. "The something to eat is the picnic part. It isn't a picnic unless you have cracker pies, or something like that. Of course we had some in our pockets — "

"Pies?" echoed Dick, mystified, — "*pie* in your pocket?"

"*Cracker*-pies," the duet corrected again. "The plain, round kind of cracker that you split; and then you put berries in, and squash them. Raspberries are the best. Cracker pies make a lovely picnic.

"We made them with blackberries, and then

we tried mixing in some of the checkerberries; but that made them taste just a *little* queer.

" But we picked our little baskets full of checkerberries for mamma, and then we went on exploring. But the woods got so thick and bushy, and the banks were so steep, we had to take off our shoes and go *in* the brook to get along at all. It was *so* exciting, Dick ! "

" Yes, I should say so — a pair like you ! " Dick agreed. " But where does the bad luck you were talking about come in? *I* never heard of such good luck as finding a partridge on her nest ! "

" Oh, the bad luck came at the end," they told him, laughing. " That was why we had to give up exploring and go home, without ever finding out where Darling River comes from.

" We had climbed up on the bank again, — it was all rocks, and moss, and fallen-down trees, but the brook had little waterfalls and then deep

holes, every few steps, so we couldn't wade any more.

"Then we came to a perfectly beautiful hole, so deep it was just black, and it ran 'way in under the bank. And we knew there must be trouts in it, because —"

"Trout — trout!" Dick interrupted in a shocked voice.

"— trout in it," repeated the duet obediently, "because it was just like the brooks we saw in the mountains last year; and whenever we came to a hole like that papa would stand still and look at it, and say he'd bet there was a trout under that bank. He didn't really *see* any," Mary explained conscientiously ("No, he didn't see any!" murmured Dick, who was a fisherman himself), "but he knew they were there, — so of course we knew it, too; and we were hunting for the trouts" ("Trout," said Dick), "— for the trout; but we couldn't see in under the bank far enough.

"So we walked out on an old log in the water —" Marigold was talking fast, her excitement growing with the tale — "and it was all grown over with that green moss that feels sposhy when you step on it, and streams out in the water like mermaids' hair, you know."

"Yes, I know, — exactly like 'em," Dick assented.

"And we walked 'way out, and the log jiggled so —" Mary had chimed in again, and the duet grew confused, like a fugue: "so it scared the trout, and he jumped — he *popped* right out of the water — and that scared *us* — no, we weren't scared, exactly, but it *s'prised* us; and *we* jumped — no, not really jumped, but we sort of jumped; and the log turned over —"

"And Mary — sat — right — *down!*" finished Marigold in a little gleeful shriek.

Dick threw back his head and laughed out, — and so did Papa Merington; but the chil-

dren were too intent on their story to be interrupted.

"Then Marigold tried to pull me up, and she stepped off the log; and the water splashed some —" ("Some?" said Dick) "so she was just as wet as I was. And that mermaid's hair stuff sticks to you like everything; so when we got up on the bank again, you ought to have seen us! We looked pretty funny."

"Quite so!" agreed Dick gravely. "And the trout — how did he look?"

"Oh, we didn't see him any more after that," Mary explained, quite seriously; and at that papa and Dick exploded again.

"We put on our shoes and stockings, quick," Marigold went on; "and I wasn't very cold, but Mary was so cold her teeth clicked; so we hurried all we could, and where the path was clear we ran. And when we got out of the woods into the hay-field, what do you think? We

didn't have a single checkerberry left in our baskets!"

"Not a single one, just think!" sighed Mary. "And so now, you see, we don't know the beginning of Darling River yet!"

"Well, perhaps it's nicer that you don't," Dick suggested consolingly. "If you had found the beginning, you would know all about it, and there would be only one; but now you can keep on 'supposing' all sorts of pretty places for it and have as many beginnings as you can imagine, until next summer."

Dick happened to know that brook and its trout pools very well, and he knew its beginning, in a little alder swamp, not far beyond the scene of their catastrophe.

"All the same," he added as he carefully released himself from the armchair and the twins' double embrace, "I quite sympathize now with your point of view. The trip wasn't much of a

success, considered either as going berrying or going fishing. We will hope for better luck when we go skating." And then he rose to say good night.

When mamma came down after tucking the children in that night, papa laid down his paper and began to laugh again.

"This is a wonderful tale of exploration and adventure," he said. "Why did I never hear of it before?"

Mamma smiled also, in sympathy with his amusement.

"It was while you were in New York," she answered; "and I suppose when you came home we all forgot it, we were so busy moving back to town."

"But are you sure it did them no harm? Didn't Mary take cold?" he questioned rather anxiously.

"Oh, no, not a bit!" she answered tranquilly. "It was a warm day. Of course I gave them a good bath and rub, and they were in clean clothes and ready for fresh mischief inside an hour.

"But doesn't it show how much stronger Mary is — how wonderfully she has gained in these two summers since we found Marigold? My dear, we owe very much to our new daughter. The companionship and the wholesome romping have done Mary a world of good. Two years ago, if that had happened it would surely have made her ill."

"Yes, it is certainly a wonderful improvement," said papa thoughtfully; "but the change in Mary is not the greatest wonder: the greatest is the change in Mary's mother — that she takes all these mishaps and adventures so serenely. If this had happened two years ago, you would have sent for a doctor and telegraphed for me!"

"Perhaps I should," she laughed. "Yes,

Marigold has done me good too. I worry less over two children than I used to over one.

"Indeed there is no use worrying about Marigold; she gets into her scrapes and out of them so quickly there really isn't time. Twice as many daughters seems to mean ten times as many pranks. But she always comes safely out of her adventures."

"Yes, — but that is one point that troubles me a little," papa said doubtfully. "They are always Marigold's adventures — it is she who plans and puts them through.

"The little witch is a born leader — but doesn't she lead Mary a little too much? — give her no chance to develop her own strength of character? I don't want my Marykin to be 'ditto' to anybody, even her twin."

"Oh, not at all," put in the mother quickly. "Don't be afraid, dear — I am sure there is no danger. Marigold takes the lead, I know, out-

of-doors, but romping isn't the only thing. In other ways Mary is the leader quite as often: watch them, and you will see. Mary has plenty of character of her own — a very strong, sweet little character; and it has influenced Marigold strongly, too. Only see how she has improved this year, dear child. While Mary has grown two inches since April, and has three freckles on her nose!"

Papa laughed. "True little mother!" he said. "She won't hear a word against either of her chickens. Don't worry, dear — I am very well satisfied with both my daughters, and very proud of them both."

CHAPTER III

GOING SKATING

"ALL ready? Sure you haven't forgotten your skates?" Dick asked. "Why, you look as pert and pretty as a pair of blue-jays."

They did really remind one of those trim and saucy winter birds as they stood ready, prancing with impatience to be off.

Their long gray-blue winter coats were of the jays' own color, and with their big blue hats and soft silvery furs they made as pretty a winter picture as one could wish to see.

Each was swinging in one hand the precious new pair of skates, shining bright as silver; and at that surprisingly stupid question they shook and jingled them at the questioner in triumphant scorn.

Forget their skates indeed! Had they not spent

every spare moment of the past three days admiring them, polishing them, gloating over them? all but eating and sleeping with them? No, they had not forgotten their skates!

Dick would have taken charge of both pairs, along with his own, but neither little girl would relinquish her treasure for a moment. So they set forth, gaily; and mamma, watching them from the window, smiled with fond pride after the two blue-clad little figures, tripping and chattering on either side of their tall escort, like the blue-jays he had called them, and proudly swinging the bright little skates, which glittered and twinkled as far down the street as her eyes could follow them.

They took the street-car — they rode through the city and out to the pleasant suburbs, where pretty houses stood apart, and the high banks of snow that walled the sidewalks were white instead of brown. "Vanilla snow," Mary said. "Ours is chocolate."

None of them found the trip long; the little girls were too eager to see, and enjoy, and understand everything they came to, and they kept Dick too busy and amused with their chatter and questions.

"Mary 'n' Mary" were famous for keeping people busy; it was impossible to be bored where they were.

From the car they had only a few minutes' walk to the pond, which lay almost in the heart of a big thriving town, and was bordered by streets and houses on all sides except that one where the overflowed meadows which Dick had described stretched away, wide and smooth, to a maple swamp.

To this side of the lake they made their way, running and sliding along the shore, where the circling crowd of skaters was not so dense; and there, kneeling before the tussocks of coarse meadow grass, which made very convenient seats,

Dick carefully adjusted first one and then the other pair of shiny little new skates.

Then he slipped his own on quickly; but before he could rise to his feet Marigold had tumbled down twice, and Mary three times.

Dick proved himself an excellent teacher, for he would not allow them to push with one foot and slide on the other, as beginners naturally do, but insisted on their learning the right motion first of all, and then doing it that way and no other.

He helped each in turn while the other practised alone (or rather, got up and fell down), and was much pleased to see how quickly they "got the hang of it," as he said.

At intervals, while they rested, clinging to each other and getting their breath, he would skate around them with marvellous fancy strokes, or cut the most beautiful figures on some smooth bit of ice near by.

And then, by ones and twos people would stop

and gather to watch and admire; and sometimes one would ask him how he did this or that, — and the children felt immensely proud of him.

Marigold was as usual a little the bolder of the two, and made quicker progress; so she generously allowed Mary to have two-thirds of Dick, while she worked away by herself, with a flushed and frowning face.

"I *will* make my feet go where I tell them to!" she declared. "The idea of their *not!*"

By and by Dick started off with Mary, holding her firmly with crossed hands, to make a circuit of the shore — her first long venture.

Their progress was necessarily slow, and was made much slower and more complicated by Mary's desire to skate and talk at the same time; so between holding her up, watching for collisions, and answering her questions, Dick's hands were more than full.

"Oh, Dick!" she panted presently, "we al-

most forgot to tell you, only think! Mamma wants us — to go see Grampavance — before we start for home."

"All right," responded Dick, steadying her. "We will do it. But will you kindly inform me first, just what *is* a grampavance?" (That really was the way it sounded as Mary said it.)

She laughed a joyous peal, and toppled perilously.

"Why, Dick, don't you know? Haven't we ever told you about Grandpa Vance?" and as they continued on their wavering course she proceeded, breathlessly and disjointedly, to explain.

"He's not exactly our real grandpa, you know, — only we call him so because mamma did, when she was little and used to play with his grandchildren.

"And now they are all grown up and dead, and he — oh, Dick! — he has to live with Mr. and Mrs. Pepperell, and — oh, catch me! I'm

going! — and it isn't far — away — from here, mamma thought," and Mary came to a period and a " full stop " at the same moment.

When Dick had helped her up and brushed her off and started her on again, she resumed her story as though no interruption had occurred.

" Grampavance is so nice, and he loves to have us come and see him — so mamma brings us with her as often as she can. He has lovely long white whiskers, and he is writing a book — why, what does make me wobble so? — all about the Greeks and Romans and their battles — because he says that all the people who wrote the histories made mistakes.

" But papa says that doesn't matter much, because — Oh — oh, *quick!* — because if the histories hadn't made the mistakes the Greeks and Romans would have made them. He says — if there weren't any mistakes — there wouldn't — be — any wars!

"Why, Dick, isn't it funny! When I talk I fall down!"

"Yes," said Dick, picking her up, "and that's why I am afraid you will never make a real, crack skater. But now let's go back and meet Marigold — that little blue speck 'way back there, see?"

"Why, yes, how far we've come! — she seems a mile away, but doesn't she skate beautifully?"

"And so do you," he answered encouragingly. "It would never do for one Mary to get ahead of the other. 'Mary 'n' Mary' always go together.

"Now suppose you try going back all alone — Yes, let go of me; you'll get one-sided, holding on so tight. Besides, it might make you talk one-sided, and then how you'd feel!

"Don't look at your feet — keep your eyes on that boat-house over there, and make a bee line for it. And don't talk — don't open your mouth, except when you want to scream. Of course you

can scream all you like; that is part of learning to skate."

So they started back toward Marigold, who was coming slowly after them with short, determined strokes.

Mary took full advantage of Dick's permission to scream; but he kept close beside her, and as often as she began to "wobble" she found herself caught and steadied almost before she had time to scream. And so, proceeding cautiously but bravely, they did so well that there was not a single upset until she reached Marigold. Then the two promptly fell into each other's arms, and Dick picked them both up, one with each hand.

Next came Marigold's turn for a final lesson.

Always a little stronger than Mary, and more skilful in the use of her muscles, she had made surprising progress; and now she stoutly declared that she had learned to skate plain, and next time they came she was going to learn to skate on her edges, like Dick.

"You needn't wait till then," he assured her. "You've skated on every edge you've got, this afternoon!"

Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was tumbled, and her breath was nearly gone; but she was so pleased and inspired by her success in acquiring this new art, and so intent on practising it and feeling her growing skill, that she was quite unconscious of fatigue, and very unwilling to stop when Dick announced that it was time.

"You will be quite stiff enough to-morrow without any more of it," he said. "Besides," he added adroitly, "Mary's getting tired, and she will be lamer than you will;" and at that Marigold gave in instantly. She was always motherly careful of Mary.

She stood still and waited while Dick went back to meet that little person, who was following bravely but very unsteadily behind them, and at Dick's approach flung both arms around him

with such a wild clutch of relief that they both very nearly went down together.

Then he made her lean against him and hold herself stiff and straight with her feet close together, while he pushed her, skating slowly and smoothly, across the meadow back to their starting point.

It was delightful to glide along so easily with no effort of her own, and Mary fervently declared that she would like to go a million miles that way! but Dick thought perhaps half a million would be enough for him.

And besides, Marigold was waiting — and Mary was eager that she too should have the pleasure of being pushed.

Marigold said it made her feel like a baby-carriage, but she liked it as much as Mary had, and when at last they all stood beside the shore ready to take off their skates, the little girls' faces were shining with such perfect satisfaction and

contentment that Dick felt his half-holiday had been well spent.

But now for the first time they began to be conscious of their tired little bodies.

"It *buzzes*, all over me," said Mary — "'way down to my toes and fingers. It feels almost like hitting your crazy-bone, only it doesn't hurt. What makes it go like that, Dick?"

"It's because you are tired, — you have been working pretty hard this last hour, — didn't you know it?" Dick said rather anxiously, "but I can't let you rest here — you mustn't cool off too fast."

He stood looking doubtfully at his precious little pair of responsibilities, while they clung to his coat sleeves and stamped their benumbed feet, wondering if he had let them keep at it too long.

But Mary's rosy cheeks reassured him; he knew how easily that pretty briar-rose pink would fade if she were over-tired.

As for Marigold, she was sure to be all right as long as Mary was — and a little longer.

Still, he was a little puzzled as to what to do next; and he began for the first time to feel the full weight of the responsibility he had so cheerfully assumed.

It was Marigold who relieved his mind.

She was clasping his arm with both hands to support herself while she tried experiments with her feet. Suddenly she bethought her to make the inquiry — "Now, are we going to see — Grandpa *Vance?*"

The last word popped out with unintentional emphasis as Marigold unexpectedly sat down. The experiment had been a failure.

"Why, that's so," said Dick in a relieved tone, detaching Mary from his other sleeve and kneeling beside her collapsed twin. "I was forgetting all about that venerable relative.

"Now I guess we'll get these things off, so you

"MARY STOOD UP, CLASPING DICK AROUND THE NECK SO TIGHTLY THAT SHE ALMOST CHOKED HIM."

can stand on your feet instead of your heads, and then we will go look up our friends and get good and warm before you start for home. How far off does this Grampavance live?"

Marigold sat where she was while her skates were unfastened and then scrambled to her feet.

Mary stood up, clasping Dick around the neck so tightly, as he knelt before her, that she almost choked and quite blinded him.

But presently her skates were off also, and then his own; and then the two bright little pairs were slung on the same strap with the long, well-worn ones, and they left the ice — the children walking stiffly and wondering why they seemed to have no toes at all.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. PEPPERELL'S TEA

It was not far, they found, from the lake to the small, quiet side street where "Grampavance" (or, rather, where the Pepperell family) lived.

The house was a very plain one, long and narrow, with only space enough at the side for a narrow path leading to the back yard, and it stood so close to the street that the front steps went directly up from the sidewalk.

Dick had hardly pulled the bell knob when a loud, firm step sounded within, approaching through a long hallway with a rapid stride, and the door was opened smartly by Mrs. Pepperell herself.

"Land o' Goshen!" said Mrs. Pepperell. "If it isn't Mary 'n' Marigold! Where under

the canopy did you drop from, this cold day? Come right in and get warm, 's quick's you can."

She stepped back and flung open the parlor door.

Mary and Marigold had both opened their lips at the same moment to introduce Dick, but Mrs. Pepperell gave them no time as she hurried them inside and slammed the street door, still talking.

"Your gran'pa will be tickled to death to see you. He was speaking of it only this morning, what a time it's been since any of you was out. Where's your mother? Any of you been sick?"

As she spoke she jerked open the door of the big base-burner stove, slammed it shut after one critical glance, and in the same instant pushed open a slide at the base with her foot.

Only after these hospitable preliminaries were over, did she pause for an answer to her questions, and give the little girls a chance to explain why they had come without their mother, and to present their escort.

Then for the first time Mrs. Pepperell seemed to realize the presence of a stranger; and she looked him over with a frank, keen, summing up inspection which made Dick feel thankful that he was really a respectable person and that his collar was clean.

He returned her look with an equal interest, for it was easy to see that Mrs. Pepperell was a "character."

She was a tall, strongly built, large boned woman, uncompromisingly plain in both face and dress, and with an odd effect of not matching her surroundings. The small and somewhat stuffy parlor did not seem to belong to her at all.

It was not until she had pulled off the children's coats and pushed their chairs close to the stove that she remembered she had not notified Mr. Vance of their visit.

"I'll go see if the old gentleman's up," she said. "He hasn't been real well since that spell he had

back in the fall and he lays down considerable, afternoons."

She retreated to some inner room on the same floor, and presently returned to report that he was just waking up and would be out soon.

"Now hadn't you better all just come out in the dining-room, where it's warmer?" she went on. "I can't *keep* this front room warm, anyways in the world, after the sun gets off it in the afternoon."

They followed her into the dining-room, which was also sitting-room, and had a more comfortable air of being lived in every day.

The visitors found seats for themselves as much out of Mrs. Pepperell's way as possible, and she moved rapidly back and forth while she went on talking.

"Now I'm just going to make you something hot to drink — you'll need it, I'll be bound. No, now don't you say one word, it ain't a mite of

trouble, — it won't take a minute to boil the kettle, and I'm just going to give you what I've got. Besides, I can give the old gentleman his tea at the same time — he has his early, for Mr. Pepperell he doesn't get home till pretty late — and he'll be pleased as Punch to have company. So you sit right still, and don't you say a word!"

Mrs. Pepperell did not mean literally to enjoin perfect silence, but her guests were well content to rest comfortably in the warm room watching her brisk movements, and let her do most of the talking.

"So you've been skating," she went on, as she hurried into the kitchen, and then her words were lost in the shaking of the stove-grate. In another minute she had whisked across the room and into a deep closet, whence her voice emerged accompanied by the opening and shutting of a tin cake box.

"When I was a girl — Mary, had you just as

soon hand me that plate off the sideboard? — I used to be a great hand for skating. You will have to eat cold bread, so I might as well give you a little mite of this plum cake to help it down."

She was cutting the cake now, with vigorous strokes, and it smelled delicious.

"But I don't know — I guess nowadays I'd just as lief somebody that's younger'n what I am should do my skating for me, and let me keep warm. It's a pretty cold kind of fun, I call it." She brought out the cake plate and set it down with a thump in the middle of the table.

Everything she did seemed to be done with a thump. She was what old-fashioned people call a "driver."

"You must be half froze, both of you young ones. You'd ought by good rights to have a good hot cup of composition apiece, and I wish't I had some of it in the house."

The little girls looked puzzled. They had never

tasted " composition tea," so they did not shudder; but Dick did. He felt very thankful indeed that it was the ordinary kind of tea that his hostess was now shaking out of the tin canister.

By this time he had found out what it was that gave Mrs. Pepperell her queer air of being at odds with her belongings. It was the " up-country " type.

She was a country woman, born and bred, and she could have looked really at home only in a roomy old farmhouse kitchen with its yellow painted floor, and the pump in the sink.

The stride and swing of her movements suggested the long distances between stove and woodshed, buttery and dinner-table.

In the small city tenement her energetic motions were checked at every other step, and this habit of being continually brought up short gave an abruptness and jerkiness to her actions which was quaintly reflected in her conversation.

"They used to say — do you like cheese, Mr. — I don't know now as I've got your name."

Dick said it was Saunders, and that he did.

"Yes, they called me the best skater there was in our village, — amongst the girls, that is," Mrs. Pepperell went on, diving into the sideboard cupboard for the cheese. "Many's the time I've skated down to the Lower Plains village and back — a good ten miles — on a moonlight evening, and thought nothing of it."

"Then you haven't always lived here?" Dick slipped in.

"Here? My land, no!" She went into the kitchen, lifted the teakettle lid, and returned with the bread plate.

"I was born and brought up in the country, and I never was out of sight of the mountains till after I was twenty" — she went out again for the butter — "and I wish't I was there now: it's the only place to live!"

"Yes," assented Dick with a reflective smile, "you can have pretty good times in the country."

"Well, I guess!" returned his hostess with emphasis. "When I think of the hay-rides and the boat-rides in the summer, and the sleigh-rides and skating and sliding down hill, I don't see for the life of me what young folks want to live in a city *for!* But I notice considerable many do," she added drily.

She paused and looked the table over with a vaguely troubled expression as though conscious that something was lacking but uncertain what.

Then she gave a start and a short laugh.

"Well, I should think as much! Here I am talking away and forgetting half what I'm about! —or doing it wrong end to. You can't talk *and* work, my mother used to say.

"I ain't set the table at all, yet — I guess I must have thought you all ate with your fingers!"

Marigold had already silently noted this peculiarity in her arrangements, and felt much relieved as another dash into the deep closet produced a tottering pile of dishes.

But Mrs. Pepperell could not deny herself the pleasure of recalling her girlhood memories, and the stream of her talk flowed on while she placed the cups and plates; but she set them down more gently than before, and her hard features wore a reminiscent smile.

"There was one time on that pond I'll never forget the longest day I live," she said. "The most ridiculous thing!

"'Twas the brightest moonlight, and all the young people in town were out.

"That was the winter they started the tub-factory, and there was considerable many strangers in town.

"Somehow or other I'd got separated from the girls I was with, and was skating along alone in a

kind of a lonesome stretch, when here comes this young man, a-sailing before the wind.

"'Twas plain to be seen he wa'n't any great of a skater by the way he came along; for he was using considerable ice, and his arms and legs was going every which-way — the most ridiculous spectacle, he was. I tried to get out of his way, but land! the pond wa'n't big enough.

"Seemed as if one of his feet was politer than the other, and tried to turn out for me, but the other one hadn't as good manners." She paused a moment, the sugar bowl in one hand.

The children were in fits of laughter, and Dick's face wore an absent grin, as of one who gazed on visions of the past.

Mrs. Pepperell regarded them for a minute with a look of indulgence; then, coming to herself with a start, she looked into the bowl to see how much sugar was in it, shook it up as if to make sure it was not deceiving her, and set it on the table with a thud.

"Well, anyhow," she resumed, punctuating now with the clink of forks and spoons as she laid them down, — "there he came, 'a-flying all abroad' as you might say, — and there was I, — and there was the ice; and then, first thing I knew, there was all three of us! He'd run plump into me, full tilt, and down we both went! And I guess folks must have felt the jar over to the village."

Having completed the setting of the table, Mrs. Pepperell had started, teapot in hand, for the kitchen, but paused midway, absorbed in her tale.

"Well, it was all of a minute, I guess, what with being so shook up, and so dumbfounded, before it entered into our heads we could do such a thing as get up again — either one of us.

"So there we sat, looking at each other — perfectly ridiculous!

"He was quite a pleasant appearing, stoutish young man — a perfect stranger to me — but,

land! I didn't think anything about that at the time, — I was good and mad; but he looked as smiling as a basket of chips!

"'Well, for the land's sake!' says I. 'What under the canopy are you trying to do?'

"'Why,' says he, as cool as you please, 'I thought 'twould be a nice place to make a hole in the ice, and catch some fish.'"

Mrs. Pepperell made an eloquent pause, and waved the teapot silently, as though unable to express her sense of the supreme ridiculousness of this.

Dick and the little girls laughed gaily, and her grim smile deepened in evident enjoyment of their appreciation.

"Well," said Dick presently, uncertain whether this was the end of the story, — "did you catch anything?"

Mrs. Pepperell had recollected her errand, and turned to go.

"Nothing but the young man," she flung back drily over her shoulder, — "That was the first time ever I laid eyes on Mr. Pepperell."

She vanished into the kitchen, and they heard the kettle jingle and clash as she filled the teapot.

Into the sudden quiet which followed her exit came the sound of an opening door, and then the slow tap of a cane in the hall; and the children sprang up to meet "Grampavance" as he entered.

Dick rose quickly, too, at sight of the new comer, and waited respectfully for his greeting.

Mr. Vance was a tall old man, with a gentle, scholarly face and a beautiful long white beard. He seemed to be very lame, and moved slowly and with difficulty, leaning on a heavy cane.

If he was "as pleased as Punch" to see his visitors, he certainly did not express his feelings as freely as that gentleman does, and the only likeness between them seemed to be the size of their

sticks. But he was evidently fond of the children, and very glad to see them.

There was something pleasantly old fashioned in his manner, — a formality and courtesy in his way of speech; and he treated the little girls with a serious politeness, — quite as though they were grown-up ladies, — which embarrassed while it pleased them.

Dick also was gratified by his reception; and he sat by, while Mary and Marigold told about their day's excursion and gave their mother's messages, wondering what kind of a real grandfather this dignified old gentleman would make.

A little *too* dignified and impressive for every day, perhaps, he thought; but what a splendid grandfather for Sundays!

CHAPTER V

GRAMPAVANCE AND DEMOSTHENES

WHEN Mrs. Pepperell came in again, the teapot in one hand and a plate of cold meat in the other, she was followed by another member of the household, on whom the children pounced with cries of delighted welcome.

He was a magnificent great yellow cat, short haired but superbly marked with broad dark bands and stripings.

His broad, fluffy face and golden eyes wore an expression of perfect placidity and affability, and his manners were a good deal like Mr. Vance's, dignified but kind.

He serenely allowed himself to be patted and stroked and "poored" by four little hands at once, and when Mary lifted him — using both

arms and all her strength — into Dick's lap, to introduce the two, he graciously staid there for a minute or two, his yellow eyes gazing, tranquil and unwinking, in Dick's face, and his great tail sweeping to and fro in long, slow curves.

Dick liked cats, and was properly flattered by his friendliness (as *any* one is, whether he likes it or not, when a cat or a baby makes friends with him).

The children called him, caressingly, " Mossy; " but Mr. Vance addressed him formally by his full, impressive title of " Demosthenes," and treated him as he did every one, with grave, kindly politeness.

When presently Demosthenes jumped down from Dick's knees, with a soft heavy thud upon the carpet, he crossed the room and seated himself, very tall and dignified, close by Grandpa Vance's chair, within easy reach of his absently stroking hand. Evidently the two were old friends, and understood each other.

Mrs. Pepperell now made her last impetuous entry, this time with a pitcher in each hand, containing the milk and hot water.

"Well, now we are ready at last, — you can fetch up your chairs."

"I presume you'd rather have cambric tea," she went on briskly, addressing the little girls. "Your mother's got too much sense, *I* know, to let you drink tea and coffee, — and I'd know by those red cheeks of yours, if no other way."

As she stopped speaking to attend to the various cups and saucers, Dick made a complimentary remark about Mossy, who remained where Grandpa Vance had left him, sitting bolt upright and gravely watching them all.

Mrs. Pepperell did not seem displeased by the admiration he excited, but apparently she did not share it herself, for she eyed him with a sort of tolerant disapproval.

"Yes," she said ironically, "that's a very valu-

able cat, I call him. I've had him three years, and not one blessed thing has he caught in that time for himself. I catch the mice and give 'em to him!

"He won't go out — you can't *get* him to go — just sits around like a bump on a log, getting fatter and lazier every day he lives. He's well enough to look at, but for keeping the mice away he don't amount to a hill of beans!

"I'd have given him away long ago if it wasn't for Mr. Vance, — but he thinks the world and all of him. He sets in his room with him the greatest part of the time, and I believe my soul they read Greek together."

As Mrs. Pepperell lifted the teapot to pour the tea she stopped suddenly, holding her uplifted arm stiff and still.

"Go 'way!" she said severely. "Get down! That ain't manners." And then they all saw the great soft yellow paw hooked firmly into her sleeve. Demosthenes was asking for his supper.

He got down, and he went away, — his dignity not in the least ruffled by his rebuff. He made the circuit of the table, rubbing gently against each person as he passed, and halted beside Mr. Vance.

After a few minutes, when he judged the attention of the company had been diverted from his proceedings, his big yellow ears appeared just above the edge of the table, as he stood with his paws resting on Mr. Vance's knee.

The children watched him with delighted interest, but Mrs. Pepperell made a careful pretence of not noticing as the old gentleman, with deprecatory glance in her direction, silently offered the trespasser a morsel of meat from his own fork.

Demosthenes hooked it off daintily with one claw, and as silently disappeared. Mary and Marigold were charmed by this breach of discipline, and still more so when the tawny ears next appeared at Dick's elbow, and he boldly and openly followed Mr. Vance's example.

He went further, and gently rubbed the yellow ears; whereupon the next move was a muffled thump on the under side of the table which made his teacup jingle, as the great heavy fellow scrambled up on his knees.

Mary, who sat next him, could not repress a little giggle of pleasure at this, and Mossy's mistress smiled austerely.

"Well I vow!" she ejaculated, addressing nobody in particular. "How I'm ever going to teach that cat to behave —!" but she made no further objection, and the deep hum of his purring made a gentle undertone to the conversation during the rest of the meal.

Grandpa Vance was entertaining Marigold politely if a little laboriously, illustrating his story with a large folding map of the Peloponnesus, which it seemed he carried always in his pocket.

Mary was talking with Mrs. Pepperell, and after answering a good many questions about herself

and her family she presently returned to the talk before supper.

It was always noticeable that Mary took more interest in grown-up people and their affairs than Marigold did. No doubt it was because as an only child she had lived chiefly in their company, while Marigold, in her Mary Murray years, was romping, working, and studying among the crowd of children in McGowan's Lane.

So it was with real sympathetic interest that Mary asked Mrs. Pepperell whether she had meant she would truly rather live in the country than in this nice place; and Mrs. Pepperell, seeing that the interest was real, answered as seriously as though she were speaking to Mary's mother.

"You better believe I would!" she said emphatically. "I'd go in a minute if we could find a real good chance.

"Mr. Pepperell he wants to get back on the land

— he'd enjoy a sight better health if he could. He was born and brought up on a farm.

"He's a State of Maine man, — but we don't need to go's far off's all that. All I want is a small place where I can raise my own garden-sauce and know what I'm eating — and keep a cow and know what I'm drinking, too!

"I am sick and tired of living where I can't step foot off my own doorstep without stepping on the sidewalk. I'd *rather* have to hitch up and go to the village when I need a spool of thread."

"But aren't you afraid you'd be lonesome?" Mary suggested gently.

"Well, I'd like to try being lonesome for a change, — it would be a good kind of lonesome!" declared Mrs. Pepperell with energy.

"I guess I could make out to get along without borrowing molasses or lending baking powder — and that's about all that having near neighbors amounts to, as far as I see. I never was any

great of a hand for standing talking over the back fence when I'd ought to be hanging out the wash.

"No, it's no use talking, I've got to live in a place where there's room to swing a cat."

Mary involuntarily cast an alarmed glance in the direction of Mossy's purr, and Mrs. Pepperell hastened to add — "Not that I feel any *call* to swing a cat. I don't know as it would do me any particular good — or the cat either. But I want room enough *to* — that's all."

"And you'd have a nice pretty cow, like dear Mike — and a horse to go for the thread with," mused Mary, pleased with the picture of country comfort.

"M-h-m," assented her hostess, who also saw the pleasant picture — "'nd probably a pig."

"And chickens," Mary put in eagerly. "We used to have chickens, Marigold and I; and they were *so* interesting!"

"I'd admire to know!" returned Mrs. Pepperell

in humorous surprise. "Where'd *you* ever keep hens?"

"In South Berket, last year," Mary answered. "They were Marigold's hens, really, but I used to help her feed them; and they laid the *biggest* brown eggs! Why, Dick, only think! That was how we saw *you*, selling eggs. Isn't it perfectly s'prising, how many things have happened just from Marigold's keeping hens?"

She turned, with pretty politeness, to explain to Mrs. Pepperell.

"We were going to sell the eggs, you see, the day that we got lost; and then Dick hid in the bushes and played he was shot, to make the other soldiers hunt for him —"

"For pity's sake!" interrupted Mrs. Pepperell, quite bewildered — "Is the child out of her head?" and Dick, who had been listening to the conversation in silent amusement, came to the rescue and unravelled the tangle that Mary had made of her story.

It was his story, too, for did he not remember every minute of that eventful day when the young soldiers of the Ambulance Corps, going through their practice in the woods, had found the forlorn little pair of egg merchants with their basket, wet and frightened and lost?

It was true, as Mary had said, that many things had happened; for that day had been the beginning of his friendship with the Merington family, and the most important things that had ever happened to him happened in consequence of *that*.

Mrs. Pepperell was greatly interested in the story.

"Well!" she said at the end, "if that Marigold doesn't beat all!" and she glanced over at unconscious Marigold, absorbed in "Grampavance's" classical tales. "Isn't she a case? I guess Mrs. Merington has her hands full, these days."

The comment struck Mary as a doubtful compliment to her twin, but she did not quite know what it meant; and while she was still considering it her thoughts were interrupted by a soft, round, tawny head which popped up suddenly and silently beside her chair.

"Oh, here's Mossy again!" she exclaimed, delighted. "Mrs. Pepperell, mayn't I give him just a little bit of a piece? I do love to see him take it off with his claw, so cunning!"

"Land, yes — go on," said Mrs. Pepperell graciously; "you can't spoil him any worse than what he is now; and all the exercise he gets is eating! Mossy's a good name for that cat, for it's a wonder the moss doesn't grow on his back, same as an old turtle. But *I* didn't name him," she added — rather unnecessarily.

When they rose from the table the children were astonished to see how dark the lamp-lit street looked from the window. The wintry sunset

red had almost faded, and night was coming fast.

" Oh, dear," sighed Marigold, " I don't like it to be evening in the afternoon."

Dick was surprised, too, to find how late it was, and began to feel his responsibilities again. He hurried the children into their coats, and fumbled over the little gloves and furs like an anxious mother.

Soon they were out in the red evening light, the sharp air pinching their nostrils, but feeling fresh and pleasant around their rosy little ears.

Mrs. Pepperell stood in the open door, lamp in hand, mingling her messages to Mrs. Merington with hearty invitations to them all, Dick included, to come again soon; and not until they had crossed the street and almost reached the corner did they hear her door close with a brisk bang.

In the street-car going home the children were very quiet. The cold air and their lively exercise

had made them sleepy, and as they sat snuggling up to Dick on either side, not even Mary, who could almost always talk, had much to say.

She was half asleep when the car stopped at their street, and Marigold aroused herself from a revery that was very near a dream to murmur, "A stadium is about two hundred yards, Grandpa says, — so he ran twenty-five miles without stopping. Could you do that, Dick?"

"Certainly not!" said Dick decidedly, lifting her down from the step. "I should take a car," and the conductor, who knew all about the battle of Marathon, grinned as he rang the bell.

CHAPTER VI

DICK'S DINNER

DICK said good night to the happy, tired children on the door-step, and went home.

At least, he would have said he "went home" because it was the place where he lived; but I am afraid that was the only sense in which Mrs. Frost's boarding-house could have been called "home."

It was rather late for dinner when he arrived, but seeing as he passed the windows of the basement dining-room that some one was still at the table, it occurred to him that some little time had passed since Mrs. Pepperell's very nice tea, and he might just as well have something more to eat, if anything was to be had.

Skating is a fine thing for the appetite.

He found it was only Mrs. Belden at the table. She was always apt to come late to her meals, and finish them alone, at the long, disordered table. It did not seem a very cheerful way to eat dinner; but Mrs. Belden was not a very cheerful person, and nothing that she did seemed to make much difference.

She had been living in Mrs. Frost's boarding-house for about a year, and was understood to be a cousin or something to the landlady.

It was also understood among the boarders that she paid, at least in part, for her board by making herself useful about the house.

It had once or twice occurred to Dick that the sort of board they got was hardly worth being so very useful for, — for she seemed to be forever doing something, in a patient, dejected way, whenever he saw her.

She was a worn, faded looking woman, with a quiet, low-spirited air as though nothing very

pleasant had ever happened to her and she had not expected anything.

Her soft, gray hair must have been pretty once, but she wore it brushed back plain and flat. Even her glasses drooped, like her shoulders, and her little faded, much-washed, drab shoulder-cape, tied with black ribbons at the throat, looked tired and depressed like its wearer.

When Dick Saunders came swinging through the dim, narrow passage way into the dining-room, with a breezy greeting and the demand whether there was any dinner left, she started and drew her shoulders together nervously as though the November wind had rushed in with him.

But she liked the cheery young fellow, and she answered his greeting with a smile of wistful pleasure in his fresh young strength and courage and good spirits.

" You look as though *you* enjoyed cold weather, Mr. Saunders," she said, half reproachfully.

Dick cast an investigating eye over the uninviting table as he drew out his chair.

"So I do," he said cheerfully. "I've had the jolliest kind of a time this afternoon, and I'm good and hungry!" (By this time he had honestly forgotten Mrs. Pepperell's cake and quince preserves.)

Mrs. Belden rose as he spoke, with a deprecating flutter.

"Oh, don't eat those cold things!" she said. "I can get you something warm in just a minute."

He protested against her leaving her own dinner unfinished, but she had already disappeared; and, knowing as well as she did how badly he was likely to fare, at this late hour, at the hands of the impatient table girl, he waited willingly and gratefully for her return.

She seemed to take a quiet pleasure in making him comfortable, and after arranging the small hot dishes around his plate and going back again

for a fresh cup of coffee, she sat down to sip at her own lukewarm cup and inquire wistfully what he had been doing with himself, to look so fresh and lively.

He told her, while he despatched his dinner as though Mrs. Pepperell's early tea had never been, the story of the afternoon's adventures. And Mrs. Belden listened, and asked questions, and actually laughed at Mary's mishaps and Dick's anxieties, and seemed altogether brighter and more interested than he had ever seen her before.

She even seemed better-looking, or so he thought; but perhaps it was the first time he had ever really looked at her. If she weren't so floppy and droopy, and wouldn't wear that irritating thing around her neck all the time, she would look quite nice, he thought. Why didn't she wear pink, like that silky, cobwebby thing Mrs. Merington had on once?

"Dear me!" sighed Mrs. Belden — "How

it brings back old times, to hear you tell it. I was a great hand for skating when I was a girl."

The remark struck Dick as familiar, as though she had already said it once — and then he recollected that it was not she, but a very different person, who had said just the same words an hour or two before; and he smiled as he thought of the contrast between the two women — Mrs. Pepperell, with her abrupt, vigorous movements and loud, decisive voice, and gentle, melancholy Mrs. Belden.

What different girls they must have been, in the long ago days when they both loved skating.

"Did you live in the country then?" he asked, curious to see how far the resemblance would go.

"Oh, yes," she answered in her pensive, spiritless way. "I was born and brought up in the country."

Still the same words, in the oddly different voice! Dick was getting interested in the coincidence.

"And would you like to go back there again?" he asked.

But at that point the likeness to Mrs. Pepperell suddenly ceased.

"Mercy, no!" Mrs. Belden exclaimed; and she pulled her little drab shawl around her shoulders with a positive shiver. "No, I have had enough of the country to last me the rest of my life. It makes me feel cold and lonesome now, to think of the winters on the farm where I lived, year in, year out, never seeing anybody or going anywhere."

"I see," said Dick sympathetically, — "kind of place where you have to hitch up and drive to the village when you want a spool of thread?"

"Yes, that exactly describes it," agreed Mrs. Belden with a rueful smile.

"It was all of two miles to the post-office, and often we wouldn't see a soul but the butcher from one week's end to another.

"I am quiet in my tastes — I never did care much for visiting or neighboring — but I do like to know there are people around, even if I don't see them. I suppose it is because I am naturally timid; — my brothers always called me a 'fraid-cat," she added with another sad little smile.

And Dick, remembering bleak, lonely, hillside farms that he had seen, thought he could understand why Mrs. Pepperell liked the country and Mrs. Belden did not.

At the same time, glancing about him at their unattractive surroundings, he could not help wondering if she were really any happier having exchanged it for the dingy city boarding-house and the monotonous, tiresome life of "making herself useful."

Most likely, though, he thought, she was simply making the best of it — she had had no choice. For although she did not speak very freely of her past life, — indeed it was a rare and difficult

thing for the shy, silent woman to speak of it at all, — he could easily put together from the hints she gave as they talked, the old sad story of struggle and discouragement: the old father, helpless with paralysis for years, — the farm rented and neglected, — the brother who in his turn had taken up the burden, and at last, disheartened and out of patience, had given it all up and moved West with his family.

Then, when the long struggle had ended in failure and the old home was broken up, poor Mrs. Belden, the widowed daughter who had cared for her father many years, had no other recourse but to make her home with "cousin Sarah" the landlady (of whom Dick said grimly to himself, he was glad she was not *his* cousin Sarah).

"Why, the poor old soul! There doesn't seem to be anything cheerful about her, — past present, or future," he thought; and as he finished

his pie and coffee leisurely he did his good-natured best to cheer her up a bit, by telling her all the funny stories he could recall of Mary 'n' Mary's adventures since he had first known that adventurous pair. And the poor lady did brighten up considerably, and seemed to take a pleased interest in the little sisters.

"Dear little things, I'd like to see them," she said. "I have missed my brother's children terribly since they moved away; and I guess they miss 'Aunt Emily,' too," she added, sighing, as she rose and made way for the impatient table girl, who had been openly trying for some time to get rid of them.

Mrs. Belden hastened apologetically to pacify her by helping to clear away, while Dick said good evening and mounted the three flights of stairs to his bedroom, pondering on the widely contrasting tastes of Mrs. Belden and Mrs. Pepperell, and "the difference there is in different folks."

For several days the pathetic little history haunted him at intervals. The sight of Mrs. Belden's worn, patient face as he met her in the halls or at table would bring the vision of her comfortless lot in life before his mind with unpleasant distinctness.

To get rid of it — since there was really nothing else to be done — he fell back on the children's favorite game of " s'posing," and in imagination he established Mrs. Belden quite delightfully on a big, prosperous farm close to the village, with a large, cheerful household, including plenty of children for her to be " Aunt Emily " to, and a comfortable, sunny house, with a furnace in it.

The furnace was added as an afterthought, to get rid of that limp, dejected little crocheted shawl which irritated him so unreasonably.

This pretty castle in the air afforded much relief to Dick's own feelings, but at the same time he was regretfully aware that it was no practical

benefit to Mrs. Belden herself, who continued to wear her little cape and to look chilly and depressed.

The only thing he seemed able to do for her was to be as cheery and friendly as he could when they met, and this he did.

Perhaps it really did her more good than he guessed. People who are naturally cheerful and buoyant do not always realize that sharing their cheerfulness with sad or quiet people is like letting in the sunshine, or giving them a seat near the fire.

But by " sharing " I don't mean merely *showing* your own good spirits, by being cheerful yourself, — that doesn't do much more good than *showing* the baby your stick of candy. You know what he would say to that, don't you?

If you wish to make him happy you must give him a piece of it; and that was what Dick did, — for he was good-hearted as well as good-humored.

He would stop a minute after dinner to tell her a story — lend her a newspaper — ask about her neuralgia; — all little things that cost him not a moment's trouble, yet brightened the evening for her, and made her sober face a little brighter in response. He really " shared " his cheerfulness.

In return, Mrs. Belden liked Dick. She was grateful for his friendliness and in little quiet ways that he never noticed she tried to repay it by looking after his comfort.

She saw to it that his books and papers were undisturbed, and his room restored to such order and comfort as might be, after the weekly hurricane of sweeping had blown through it. She opened his register (it was a frugal house) before he came home at night; and when he was late to dinner nowadays he never had to eat cold potatoes or gravy.

CHAPTER VII

FUDGE

It was Ellen's business to answer the door-bell, but when the door opened, in rather tardy response to Dick's ring, it disclosed, instead of Ellen, a very small maid, clothed all in dignity and demure politeness.

"Why, hello!" said Dick — "Mrs. Merington has a new girl!" and at the same moment the new maid recognized him, dropped all her dignity and threw herself upon him with a cry of joy.

"It's Dick! How *lovely* you came just this time! Yes, we're the girl — Mamma is out, and all the girls are out too, only think! and we are keeping house."

Here Marigold appeared from the back of the hall, and echoed Mary's welcome.

"How nice you should happen to come *this* afternoon!" she said. "Come right down and make fudge."

"And why," queried Dick, pulling off his overcoat deliberately, while they danced before him, — "why is it such a particularly fortunate time for me to show up? — and how does it happen you are deserted like this? — and what's fudge?"

"Why, you see this is Ellen's and Helda's proper day to be out," Mary began; "and mamma had only just gone away when Maggie got a letter her mother was sick, —" Marigold put in, — "so now everybody's gone and we are all alone!" they finished in concert.

"Who is all alone?" asked Dick in fresh surprise, for at that moment a distinct but distant shriek arose seemingly from the back of the house or the depths below it.

"That's nothing — just Gilbert's burned his

finger again, prob'ly," said Marigold coolly, and Mary added, in explanation, " Dorothy and Gilbert came, just as we were getting lonesome, — wasn't it lucky? and we are making fudge."

" And what *is* fudge? " asked Dick once more — but both the children were talking at once as they pulled him through the hall and down stairs toward the kitchen; so he waited to find out.

Whatever it was it evidently required unusual precautions, for both little girls were adorned with large towels, pinned over their frocks in the manner of bib-aprons.

" You see we had to come down here for the stove," Marigold was explaining, — " because mamma doesn't wish us to use the chafing dish. I *b'lieve* she said it made too much work for Ellen in the dining-room, and besides, we'd blow ourselves up. So we thought we'd just go where the stove and dishes are and be comf'table."

At this point they ushered him into the kitchen;

and as he glanced at the stove and table it occurred to Dick that even by this arrangement there would be "work for Ellen" or somebody else in the kitchen by and by. Four amateur cooks had been busy there, with the usual result of chaos.

Mary introduced the guests.

"You remember Dorothy and Gilbert, Dick," she said. "They were at my birthday party in South Berket — Why, no, you don't," she caught herself up. "*You* were not there! It was when we didn't but just know you."

Dorothy was a pretty little gipsy, perhaps a year older than the twins, with an immense bow of scarlet ribbon on her hair. She had a slightly care-worn, anxious expression which suggested that she felt a good deal of responsibility for her brother's behavior.

Gilbert's expression suggested repudiation of that responsibility. He was somewhat older than Dorothy.

The fudge was already on the stove, and Gilbert seemed to be the person in charge of it.

He was stirring it vigorously in a saucepan over the fire, and for this important business had put on Ellen's pretty waitress's apron, which she wore to serve dinner, and which he had discovered in some lawless foray in the pantry. It had ruffles over the shoulders and embroidery across the front, and pleased his taste better than Maggie's gingham apron which had been offered him.

Dorothy wore the gingham.

A clean towel was politely tendered Dick, but he decided to " be company " and look on — still hoping by dint of careful observation to learn in time what " fudge " might be.

It had chocolate in it, — for there were scattered crumbs of chocolate all over the table as well as in two dishes.

It also had sugar — for that was on the floor, crunching under every footstep.

There was milk in a pitcher and a cup, so presumably also in the fudge; and there was a plate of butter, — but this was *not* in the fudge, as a scream from Dorothy presently announced.

"Oh, Gilbert, stop — you've left out the butter! You'll make an awful mess of it! Oh, dear, I wish you would let me do it."

Gilbert turned, startled by her cry, still unconsciously holding his spoon, which left a trail of glistening brown drops over the polished range and the clean-scrubbed oil-cloth.

The fudge was now on the floor as well as on the stove; and the cook seemed slightly vexed.

"Oh, shucks!" he said. "Don't holler till you're hurt. The butter doesn't go in till the other things have boiled down."

Dorothy differed from him, and a lively argument followed, during which the other things continued to boil down and the butter waited.

As Gilbert was in possession of the pan his sister

had to give in, but she did so unwillingly. "Gilbert always thinks he knows everything best," she complained.

"I see," said Dick soothingly. "This stuff is like a Welsh rabbit. Every fellow thinks he is the only one in the crowd who really knows anything about it. And then there is generally a row, and the rabbit petrifies while they argue."

"Yes, that's just the way with fudge too," assented Gilbert. "Girls think they know how just *because* they're girls. At the same time," — he was stirring carefully now, and watching the fragrant bubbling brown mass critically, — "as this stuff is now about done, I don't mind admitting that I forgot the butter. Bring it on, Doffy," and as his sister complied in speechless indignation he condescendingly explained: "The trouble is, this kind of fudge is too simple for me to keep my mind on. Where I shine is in fancy fudge, with nuts and all sorts of extra fixings in it."

By this time all the children were hovering over the pan, watching and discussing the state of the fudge, laughing and exclaiming and bothering the cook. "Testing" is an extremely important stage in the making of fudge, and you can eat a good deal in that way alone.

Dick watched the merry group, smiling and enjoying it all; until a sudden thought which had troubled him several times that day came back into his mind again, bringing with it a little pang and driving away the smile.

It was the recollection of Mrs. Belden's face as it had looked at breakfast, — worried and despondent. He was quite sure, too, that her eyes were red.

Evidently the poor lady was in new trouble of some kind; and really, thought Dick, she didn't need any more. It was quite enough to be "cousin Sarah's" poor relation.

Perhaps it was just the contrast between the

careless gayety of these lively young folk and the older woman's dull, cheerless life that had reminded him of her at that minute. At any rate, once the thought had come it stayed, damping his enjoyment of the frolic; and for a little while he looked on with a grave face, taking no part in it.

Presently Marigold came over to him, bearing a teaspoon and a glass of water. The bottom of the glass was covered with delicious gummy drops, dripped from the testing spoon.

As she fished them out daintily and fed him with her teaspoon, Marigold took the opportunity to snuggle up against his shoulder in a cosy little-sister fashion, and whisper in his ear.

"What is the matter, Dick? What makes you look like that? Aren't you having fun?"

He put his arm around her with a big-brother squeeze.

"Good little girl!" he said. "I was only

thinking," and then the anxious kindness of the bright little face gave him a new idea, and on the impulse of it he spoke.

How would she like to give him a little of the candy to take to a poor old lady who never had fun like this — who loved little girls and hadn't any to make fudge for her?

Marigold's bright face grew brighter in a flash, with interest and pity, and her eager questions soon drew the attention of the others.

Dick knew the warm little hearts of "Mary 'n' Mary," and was sure of their ready response when he made his suggestion; but he was a little surprised as well as pleased to see how quickly all the children forgot even the absorbing interest of making the fudge in the greater interest and pleasure of giving it away.

Of course the poor lady should have some, — she should have a *lot* of it. Marigold had a lovely pink box up-stairs which would hold an *awful*

lot; and the larger of the two large buttered pans which stood waiting to receive the fudge was immediately allotted to Mrs. Belden. "This pan will be *quite* as much as we ought to eat," said Mary with an air of maternal prudence.

For a moment, diverted by the new interest, Gilbert had forgotten to stir the candy; now, suddenly recalling that it was just at the critical point, he turned hurriedly to seize the spoon.

"Haste makes waste." Instead of closing on the handle his fingers only brushed and knocked it into the boiling candy. He made a wild grab for it, burned two fingers, and howled.

The fudge was now on the stove, the floor, and the cook.

Instantly the three girls were around him, exclaiming, inquiring and pitying. Gilbert, standing on one leg with his fingers in his mouth, didn't seem able to express himself at all.

He had "cried wolf" before; but it was a real burn this time.

Still, it was not a time to neglect the fudge, which was now quite done, and liable to " catch on " or sugar off at any moment. So while Marigold flew for the ammonia bottle to bathe the smarting fingers, and Mary for a rag to tie them up, the practical-minded Dorothy got her chance at last to take possession of the saucepan.

She soon wearied, however, of the vigorous beating which was necessary while the heavy mass cooled and stiffened, and was glad to accept the help of Dick's strong hands.

As he stood at the table stirring patiently, he surveyed the general confusion with a quizzical eye.

" I think I am beginning to understand this fudge business," he remarked. " Rather an exciting sort of sport, isn't it?

" And I now recall the form of your invitation. It was, if I am not mistaken, to ' come down and *make* fudge.' At the time I overlooked its signifi-

cance and thoughtlessly assumed that 'making' implied also 'eating' fudge. But I now see that was a mistake, due to my inexperience. The game is in the making."

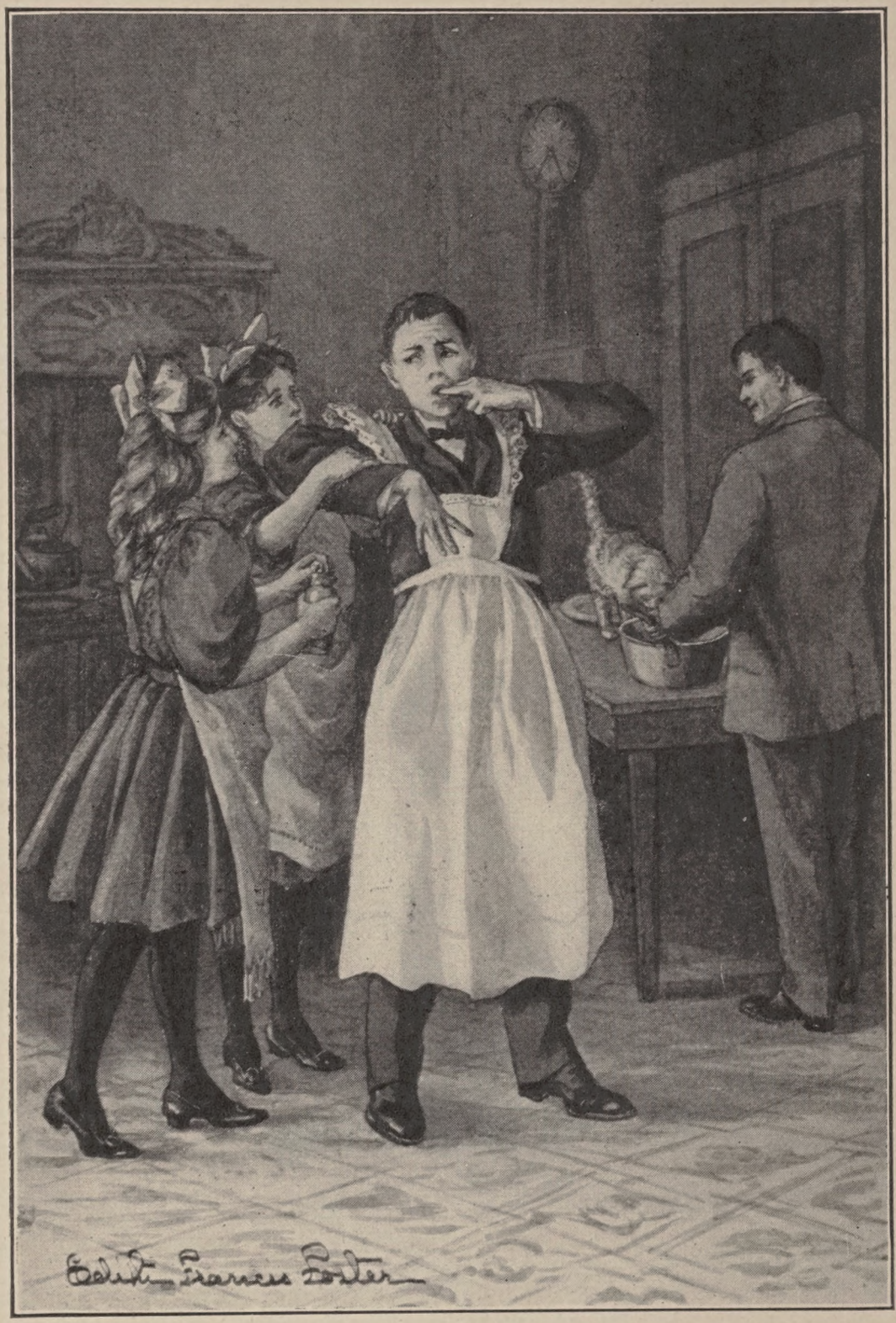
"Oh, you are going to eat it all right enough, — don't you make any mistake about *that!*" retorted Gilbert, nursing his injured fingers. "D'you suppose I am spending my valuable time and mixing my complexion into this recipe to have it wasted?"

"I am not finding any fault with your complexion, — it is all right when it is in the right place," Dick returned; "but I am not a cannibal —

"Nor a Chinaman!" he added hastily. "Keep this cat out of the candy, somebody!"

This time there were three screams, from all the girls in chorus, and a rush to the table.

She was the cook's cat — a small, thin, active person, with rough ashy-gray fur; but she had



"'OH, YOU ARE GOING TO EAT IT ALL RIGHT,' RETORTED GILBERT, NURSING HIS INJURED FINGERS."

large intelligent ears, and a resounding purr. It was the latter which at last betrayed her quiet investigations on the table at his elbow while Dick's attention was elsewhere.

Dorothy snatched up the pan, and Marigold the cat, while Mary inspected her with tender care to see if she had burned her nose — for in his haste to avert disaster Dick had rapped her with the spoon; and the fudge was now on the stove, the floor, the cook, and the cat.

"But I saw her outside on the window-sill not five minutes ago," Dorothy said petulantly. "What in the world did you let her in again for?"

"Why, she *wanted* to come," said Mary simply. "That was what she got up there for; it's her way of asking. But she isn't hurt, so it's all right."

Dorothy sniffed. "Well, then, if the cat is 'tended to, we better 'tend to the candy," she suggested. "It must be ready to harden by — oh, *yes*, Mr. Saunders, let me take it, quick!"

The fudge was at exactly the right point, and poured out beautifully, spreading over the pans in a smooth, glossy sheet.

Mrs. Belden's pan was filled first, because the first would be smoothest and handsomest; then Dorothy emptied the saucepan, and thriftily scraped the scraps that clung to its sides, into the second pan, while Dick and Mary watched the process with rapt attention.

Marigold had returned to the deserted Gilbert, and was busily engaged in binding up his hurts and tenderly sopping them with the comforting ammonia — Gilbert, of course, enjoying her services while he laughed at her for " making such a fuss " over him.

Suddenly an outcry of consternation from the other three, mingled with the clatter and bang of tinware, made them both jump, and they turned to face a new calamity — the most calamitous one yet!

The fudge was now on the stove, the floor, the cook, the cat, and the company! In fact the only place where it was *not* was in Mrs. Belden's pan, which lay upside down under the table.

CHAPTER VIII

DITTO

CONFUSION and dismay reigned for a little while, then.

Dick was rubbing off his coat sleeve with Mary's apron, — Dorothy was trying to explain how it had happened, — and the rest were asking questions and lamenting the catastrophe; while all stared in grievous disappointment at the half-solid, half-crumbled wreckage strewn over the floor.

But Gilbert's regrets were quickly swallowed up in rejoicing that it was Dorothy who had done it, and not he!

This reflection made him even cheerful, and presently he was down "on all fours," examining the wreck with a view to salvage.

Mary and Marigold, mistaking his intentions, and mindful of their duty as hostesses, begged him not to bother about that, — they would clean it up by and by.

"Why, I ain't cleaning it up, — I'm *picking* it up," protested Gilbert, from under the table. "You don't mean to say you would throw away all this good chocolate; you wouldn't let Mr. Saunders's poor old lady lose her fudge just for a little thing like that, would you?

"Now just you hold on until I scoop it up and dust it off, and who's going to know the difference? *She* won't. It isn't hurt a bit!"

"All right," said Marigold calmly, — "then *we'll* eat it, and send the other pan to Dick's poor lady."

"And then there won't be any difference for her not to know." (Mary's thoughts were sometimes clearer than her way of expressing them.)

Gilbert wrinkled his forehead at them for a moment, and then grinned.

"You've got me there!" he admitted frankly. "But it is no fair, the way you twins always stand together. It's two against one, every time."

"Twins are not two, — they are just the same as one," said Mary with gentle decision.

"Are they?" returned Gilbert in pleased surprise. "That's good, because then of course they get *one* share of the fudge. Say, there's a silver lining to this cloud anyhow — we get the biggest pan, after all."

But this attracted the attention of Dorothy, who was engaged in cutting the remaining panful into little squares, drawing her knife slowly and carefully across and across.

Intent on this, she had not noticed her brother's proceedings; but at his last words she whirled about, knife in hand, filled with horror.

"My goodness gracious!" cried the scanda-

lized sister. "Do you suppose we are going to eat *that*, right off the floor? Gilbert Brooke, stop!"

"Why, this floor's clean — it's the cleanest floor I ever saw!" pleaded Gilbert, still invisible and busy with his spoon. "Say, I don't want to waste all that work — stir my arms off and ruin my best white apron, all for nothing!"

"Well, Dorothy, perhaps we might take just the top-part" suggested Mary, hopefully, anxious to save the feelings of both Gilbert and his sister if possible (and at the same time the fudge). "Can't you pick up all but just what's right *on* the floor, Gilbert?"

She dropped on her knees and poked her head cautiously under the table beside him. "Oh, no, no, no!" her muffled voice came back to the others — "Don't, Gilbert, — *please* let me! You are scraping —"

There followed an audible scuffle for the spoon;

and Gilbert, worsted, sat up, bumping his head against the table.

"Taking up the floor with it, was he?" inquired Dick. "Never mind, this will be a brand new variety of 'fancy' fudge. He said he liked something extra in it, — why won't linoleum do?"

Gilbert grunted scornfully, and made no reply. But he ate a large piece of fudge, to make his position in the matter perfectly plain.

Mary, who had carefully examined each piece as it was gathered up, nibbled a bit to keep him company; and Marigold, after a searching inspection of the spotless floor, followed their example.

When the question came to a vote Dick gave his voice frankly and decidedly in favor of the fudge; so Dorothy was left alone.

But Dorothy loved chocolate, — and she was only twelve years old. It was not long before

she had proved the truth of Gilbert's assurance: "Shut your eyes and you won't know which pan is which."

They piled the broken pieces of candy neatly on the prettiest plate they could find, and even with their eyes wide open those sweet-loving youngsters seemed to find no great difficulty in disposing of it.

The pretty pink box was snugly packed, but even when it was "brimful" nearly half the second pan of fudge remained, — "an unexpected pleasure," as Gilbert remarked, beginning on it hopefully.

"Well, but look here!" remonstrated Dick in rather belated alarm, noticing for the first time that the plate was empty. "Are you sure you know how much fudge is good for you? Perhaps you'd better not eat any more until Mrs. Merington gets home — then you'll be on the safe side, anyway."

"Oh, yes, we are going to save some *for* mamma," the twins assured him.

They tucked the box carefully into his overcoat pocket, charging him to remember that it was in the right-hand one, and then just as he was taking leave Dick happened to recollect what he had come for — to "ask your mother if we can go skating Saturday, if the ice lasts till then."

They promised joyfully to ask her, and Dick went home with the pink box of fudge to surprise Mrs. Belden.

"Hope 'Aunt Emily' likes chocolate," he thought, as he let himself in and felt his way down the basement stairs in the twilight, in search of her. "Anyway, it ought to chirk her up a bit, to be remembered."

It did please "Aunt Emily," — oh, it pleased her more than even kind-hearted Dick had guessed; but the effect was not precisely what you could call "chirking up." Instead, she scared

him dreadfully at first, for he certainly thought she was going to cry!

Pretty little kindnesses of this sort had been very rare in the poor woman's life, and for a minute she was almost overcome; but she made a brave effort to control herself (perhaps she saw the panic in Dick's face), and when he described the candy-making she really laughed, quite heartily, and seemed to like her present all the more for the sake of its mishaps.

They had quite a friendly chat over it and other things while Mrs. Belden was setting the long tables for the boarders' dinner, and Dick warmed his toes and fingers over the stingy little register in the corner.

He did not dare to ask her what the matter was with her — he was afraid she might begin to cry again; but from one or two things she said he gathered the trouble was about money — a debt to pay, and nothing to pay with, unless by some other sacrifice.

Poor Mrs. Belden seemed completely discouraged. "This is a hard world for women, Mr. Saunders," she said bitterly.

But then she put aside the thought of her own troubles, and returned to the pleasanter topic of the dear little girls who had sent her the candy. She made him describe their looks and ways — which he did with some difficulty — and said she almost felt as if she knew them, bless their little hearts.

So, on the whole, Dick felt that his attempt to cheer her up had been a success, and he was all the more glad that he had thought of it when he saw how great was her need of a little cheering.

Yes, it was a hard world, for poor widows, he thought; and yet it was a brave, cheerful world enough for strong, courageous, young fellows — and a beautiful world for happy, cherished, little girls of eleven years. "I wish there were some way to even things up a little more," he was think-

ing rather sadly as he pulled off his overcoat in his own room.

As he flung the coat over a chair it thumped against the back, and he picked it up again, wondering what he had left in the pockets as heavy as that.

He found it, in the left-hand pocket, — a little blue box, as pretty as Mrs. Belden's, though not half as large, — and it was tightly packed with neat little squares of fudge, in which he easily recognized a portion of the share to be saved for mamma.

"That blessed little pair!" he murmured, smiling affectionately at the box, as though he too felt "chirked up." "It really does do a fellow good."

I do not know whether he meant the fudge or something else; but I do know that he ate more fudge than was good for him before he went to bed.

The second lesson in skating was as delightful

as the first had been, and the children's enthusiasm was so great they would gladly have claimed every spare moment of Dick's time for the rest of the winter in the same way, had the weather allowed.

They called again on "Grampavance" — a shorter visit, this time — and also on Mrs. Pepperell and Demosthenes.

As they all talked together, warming their tingling feet and hands around the big stove, with its comfortable smell of hot iron and polish, Mary, whose interest in the subject had been serious enough to last over, bethought her to ask Mrs. Pepperell whether her husband had yet found a farm to suit him.

"Land, no!" said Mrs. Pepperell, with a sigh as emphatic as her language.

"He keeps on looking at everything he can hear of, — he's up country now, to see a place he heard tell about, but I don't expect much from it.

"This is a poor time of year to go farm-hunting

anyway; we'd ought to have begun on it last summer."

Then seeing the troubled sympathy in the earnest little face, she added in a livelier tone, "But there! I ain't losing any sleep over it, — so don't *you*. Who knows but somebody will give me a farm for Christmas," and the sensitive little face smiled again, vaguely reassured.

Later, as they were saying good-by, Mrs. Pepperell jokingly bade her be sure, if she should hear of a farm that anybody wanted to give away, to let her know.

"Oh, yes, I will, certainly!" said Mary earnestly, though with a little smile for the joke, "and I wish *I* could give you one for Christmas, Mrs. Pepperell."

"Bless your heart, I believe you would, too," said Mrs. Pepperell heartily. "Well, good-by — tell your mother I'd admire to see her. Good-by, Marigold. Good evening, Mr. Saunders."

Alas for pleasant plans and expectations! That week the snow fell heavily, and there was an end of skating, for the time at least.

Mr. Saunders devoted his leisure to other engagements, or to the studies which he faithfully kept up; while Mary and Marigold were less disappointed than they might have been had they not been so very busy, by this time, with getting ready for Christmas.

It would be their second Christmas together, and the newness of the pleasure of doing it all — planning, sewing, shopping — in company with a dear twin sister, had not at all worn off. It doubled all the delights of Christmas preparations.

CHAPTER IX

LOST, MARY

About a week before Christmas it happened that Dick Saunders, having a business errand to do, had left the office early in the afternoon and was making his way across the city, much hampered in his progress by the crowds of Christmas shoppers who filled the streets.

It was a dark, cloudy day, with a raw chill in the air, hinting of coming snow; the kind of day which, if one is a little blue to begin with, makes one a little bluer, unless he takes care.

Dick had been a little blue to begin with.

It was a very unusual state of mind for him, — his spirits were not easily depressed.

Perhaps he was a little tired, from the steady pull of work and study; or perhaps the general air

of holiday bustle and gayety in the streets made him feel a little solitary.

Dick had plenty of friends and acquaintances, for he had a friendly, social nature himself, and made friends easily, — but they were not of the kind that plan little surprises to put in your stocking, and lie in wait for you in the morning, to be the first to say "Merry Christmas!" — not, in short, of his own family and household.

He had never been in the habit of giving or receiving gifts, so that great special pleasure of the weeks before Christmas was unknown to him.

But besides this there was something else, which made him feel that the "Christmas cheer" of song and story was almost a mockery.

The lively bustle of the "holiday trade" reminded him, as the children's candy frolic had done, by sheer force of contrast, of poor despondent Mrs. Belden, and her difficulties. Why should some people be making all this fuss about having

an extra good time, when other people were having an extra bad one?

Since the night of her half-confidence about her money-worries, the thought of Mrs. Belden always made him uncomfortable and impatient, between the wish that he could help her and the consciousness that he couldn't, and on this chilly, disagreeable afternoon, as he slowly forced his way through the thickening crowd (being a little blue to begin with), his thoughts naturally chose the most cheerless and depressing subject to dwell on, and dwelt on it persistently.

Dick was, in fact, decidedly "glum."

His most direct road lay through the heart of the shopping district, and he had unthinkingly taken it as usual.

It would have been better for his chances to accomplish his errand, to have gone a mile farther around; for as he came into the region of short and narrow streets where the great department stores

were clustered, the crowds became denser at each step he took, until at last, in the neighborhood of the biggest store of all, the sidewalks were so full that his choice lay simply between pushing his way roughly, by main strength, through the solid mass (chiefly of women and children) or merely keeping his place in it and moving as it moved.

Neither of these methods suited him, however, and he still strove impatiently and unsuccessfully to find a middle course between them.

A holiday crowd moves slowly, and Dick, wedged in and helpless, found his rate of progress extremely tedious.

As he neared the biggest store of all, he caught sight of the clock in front of it, and found to his disgust that he was already too late for the errand he had set out on. It was simply no use to struggle longer to push ahead; the business would have to wait until to-morrow.

This was vexatious enough, and it strengthened his general disapproval of the holiday business; but at the same time it relieved his immediate anxiety, and the strained effort of watching for chances to dodge around and squeeze past others, to gain a foot or two at a time.

He gave it up in a sort of sulky resignation, and moved slowly along in the press, careful only to keep his hat from being knocked off, his feet from being trodden on, and himself from being crowded bodily off the curbstone into the gutter.

When people get into a temper where they think everybody else in the world very foolish, you know they are apt to call it being philosophical: Dick was fast getting to be quite a philosopher — of that kind.

In his own private mind he described his cheerful, pushing swarm of neighbors as " ten thousand lunatics," and he wished they would all go home, and let him have the money they were wasting on

Christmas presents, to pay that vaguely haunting debt of poor " Aunt Emily's."

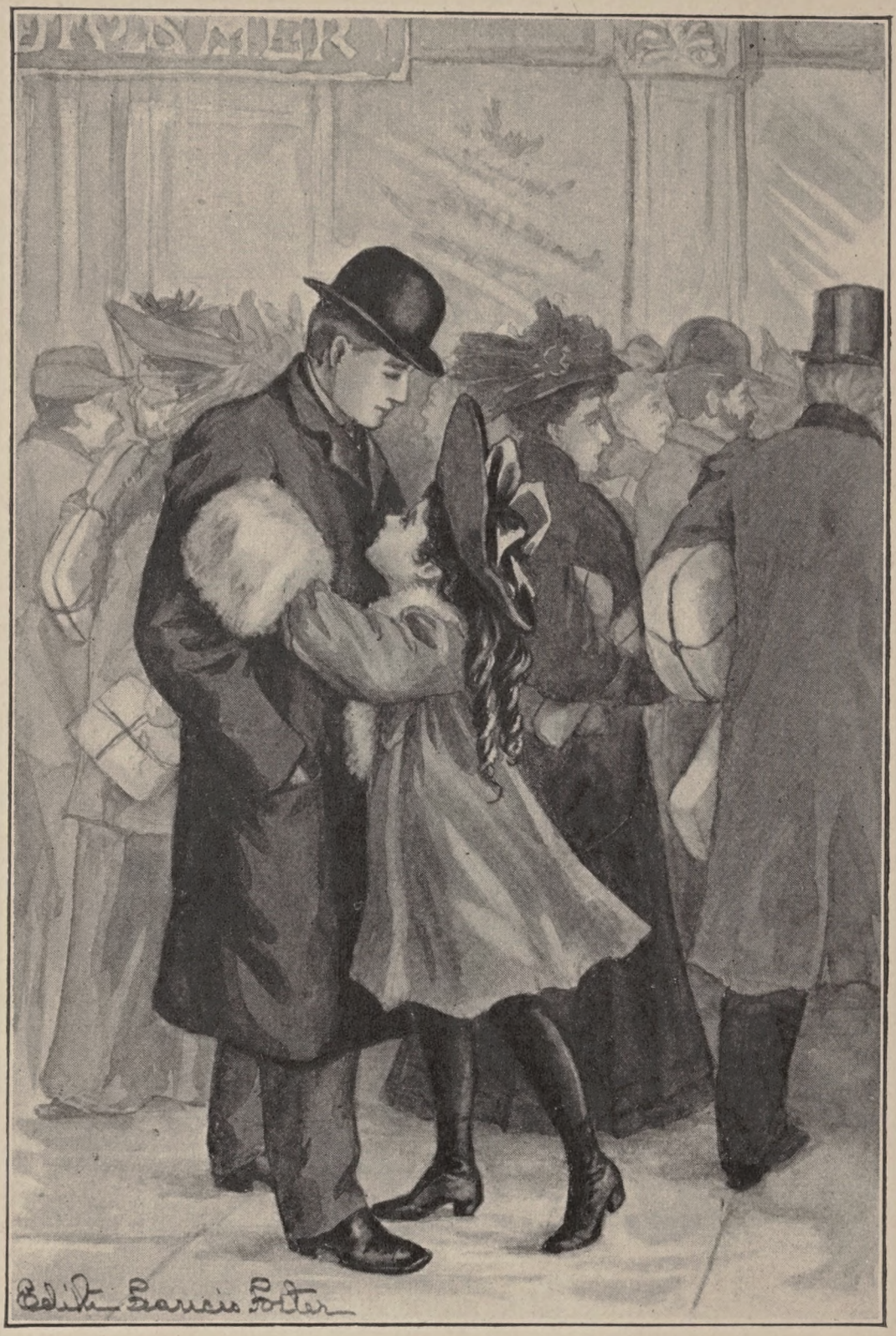
Oh, there is no knowing how philosophical Dick might have grown if his thoughts had not been suddenly interrupted.

He had nearly passed the biggest store when he became all at once aware of a very curious sensation in his left hand, pinned down at his side by the pressure of the crowd.

A very small hand, in a very soft glove, had been thrust inside his own, and was clutching it with frantic tightness!

He turned his head and tried to look downward to see what this strange thing might mean, — but his glance was stopped half-way; for down there just below his shoulder his eyes met a pair of sweet gray eyes, in a little pale face with a pointed chin, framed in a wide, furry, gray blue hat and fluffy, silvery fur.

Mary Merington — of all people — in this crush!



"'OH, PLEASE HOLD ON TO ME!'"

The little pale face was frightened, and eager, and glad, — all three at once; and her voice was all three also, as she cried breathlessly, "Oh, Dick — *dear* Dick, I *am* so glad! Oh, *please* hold on to me!"

Already the surging and shifting of the crowd was forcing them apart and the small soft glove clung despairingly to his fingers. But with a determined effort Dick wrenched himself half-around and somehow managed to get his strong right arm about the slender little figure, holding it fast against his side. Then he glanced around and past her questioningly. "Where's the rest — where's Marigold?" he asked.

The question was natural, — if one twin were here it followed as a matter of course that the other one could not be far off, — but Mary answered, still in a breathless, bewildered way, "I don't know, — I'm lost, — I've lost them! I am all alone, and I don't know what to do!"

There was a high, hysterical note in her voice, and Dick saw with alarm that if she began then to explain she would probably begin to cry also.

"Here, hold on a minute," he said hurriedly. "Let's get out of this jam! Isn't there a cosy corner somewhere around, where we can have a quiet chat?"

It did not seem very likely; and Mary smiled, a tremulous little smile, as he had hoped she would, at the idea. But in a minute or two, after a careful survey, and much adroit and skilful engineering, Dick accomplished his purpose; and Mary found herself tucked safely into a little niche just at the end of the brass railing which guarded the great show windows.

Dick braced himself in front of her, gripping the rail to prevent being swept away, and all at once the poor child felt herself in a quiet, sheltered haven of refuge.

"Now, tell me all about it," said Dick, in a soothing, reassuring tone. "Who is with you — or was? Where did you leave Marigold?" And then Mary poured out her tale of woe, talking as fast as only Mary could talk, under the stress of her excitement and fright.

They had come down town, she explained, to finish up their Christmas shopping. Mamma had meant to bring them, but her cold was so bad she couldn't; so, not wishing them to wait until she was better because the stores would be so crowded then (Dick gave a comic glance over his shoulder, and Mary laughed nervously), she let them go with Ellen.

And they were to keep right close to Ellen and not get separated — and so they had, for the first busy, bewildering half-hour or so; but then, alas! it happened that as they approached the great main entrance of the biggest store of all they had been caught between two opposite currents of the

crowd which pushed and struggled about the doors.

Ellen and Marigold had been forced in one direction, and poor helpless Mary in another.

She had tried in vain to get sight of them again, or even to make her way back to the precise spot where she had lost them. Pushed this way and that, tossed about like a ship in a stream full of rapids and whirlpools, she could not even tell where she was herself, and for what seemed to her an hour at least she had drifted helplessly, hoping against hope for the sight of Marigold's blue cloak or Ellen's tossing feathers.

With each minute that passed she grew more frightened and distressed, — she had never before in her life been alone down town, — and when at last a happy miracle threw her right against the one person in all that throng whom she knew, it seemed to her as though she had been saved

from some dreadful fate. Even now, in her safe corner, she still clung to his coat with one hand as if afraid of losing him again, while with the other she hugged her little gray muff to her breast with the same nervous grasp she had kept upon it for the last half hour.

"But why didn't you give it up, and go home?" Dick asked her. "Didn't you know what car to take?"

"Yes," said Mary doubtfully, "but I wanted *them* to find *me*, too. Marigold will feel so dreadfully to think I am lost — and all our shopping spoiled, too!

"So I just tried to stay where they saw me last — mamma says that is always the way to do — but oh dear! I couldn't, the people pushed me so! And now I don't even know where I was.

"And papa said if ever I was in trouble to tell a policeman and he would take care of me. But

I can't see any policeman, — I can't see *any*thing but people with bundles!"

"Yes," said Dick, grimly, "and rushing around to buy more bundles! What on earth they want of any more, I can't —"

Just then a big square bundle whose owner was inspecting the show window, crushed Mary's big furry hat down over her eyes.

Dick straightened it up.

"What did you wear such an umbrella thing for?" he asked, man-like. "What you need in a place like this is a skull-cap — or a fencing-mask," he added, as he dodged a long, sharp-pointed bundle that was aiming straight at his eyes.

"Yes, a little fence — wouldn't it be nice!" Mary knew but one meaning for the word.

Dick laughed. "That's so," he said, — "barbed wire!"

The laugh was rather grim. His impatience of the "Christmas nonsense," forgotten for a

time, returned in full force as he looked down at the gentle, delicate little girl and thought of her, pushed and buffeted about, helpless and frightened.

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

"WELL, now, let's see what we'd better do about it," Dick began, in a brisk, comfortably reassuring tone which had an instant effect in the sensitive little face looking up into his so trustfully.

"What do you suppose Ellen is doing? I don't seem to feel very well acquainted with Ellen, — what kind of a head-piece has she got?"

Mary looked puzzled.

"Because," Dick went on, "it all depends on that. If she has any sense she will telephone home first, and then she will stay right around this store like the Boy on the Burning Deck until she finds you. If she is scared enough she will notify the police of a 'lost baby,' besides.

"But if she hasn't got good sense, it's hard work guessing what she may do. But most likely she will hunt awhile till she gets dead scared, and then rush off home in despair — to get rid of Marigold, and to get further orders."

"Oh, but," protested Mary, "I don't think Marigold would *want* to go home — and leave me here lost."

"No, I bet she wouldn't!" Dick agreed, chuckling at the thought of that resolute little chin of Marigold's, set square, and her brown eyes blazing, imprisoned in the homeward bound car. "All the same I rather think that's what she's done, for of course your mother told you both to do as Ellen said. Now what's *your* guess?"

"We-ell," said Mary, considering, "Ellen is beautiful — she is a dear; but she does get frightened pretty easily. That time we had the burglars in our house, at South Berket, she just screamed and screamed! Yes," Mary concluded

reluctantly, afraid of seeming unkind, — "Ellen is lovely, but I really think prob'ly, Dick, she would do the scaredest thing."

"Very well, then," said Dick briskly, "if that is so the best thing we can do is to get home as quick as we can, before she has your mother scared blue.

"I'll just look around and make sure they are not about any of these doors, then we will take a car, and in twenty minutes from now you will be safe at home and all right."

He stopped in surprise; for over the peace and relief in the fair little face a faint shadow fell, and Mary's eyes grew troubled. She spoke gently but anxiously.

"Why, but, Dick — go home *now?* Why, I haven't done *any* of my shopping yet!"

He was so taken aback that for a moment he stood still and stared at her, almost with open mouth; the simple little protest seemed

to have paralyzed him. Then he began to laugh.

What a real little woman it was, after all! Her shopping!

Here he had been thinking of her as something quite apart, and different from, all "that hustling scrambling mob." She was one thing, and the Christmas crowd was another. It crushed her — overwhelmed her — and his one idea had been to get her safe out of its clutches and away. And all the time she was really one of them, with the same plans and purposes. They were doing their Christmas shopping, and so was she; and with a child's happy faculty for quick changes of feeling, now that she had a companion again and felt protected and safe, she was quite ready to go on with the fascinating business.

But all this would have been too hard to explain, so he answered the questioning gaze of the gray eyes very briefly and simply.

"Here I thought I was just the same as saving you from bears and lions, in that crazy crowd, — and now all you want is to get right back into it!"

"But won't we have to," asked Mary, innocently surprised, "if we want to get all those errands done?" and Dick gave it up, still laughing. He understood at last that she was not afraid of the big, busy, good-natured crowd itself — only of being alone in it.

He considered for a moment, how he could be spared from the office (to spend his afternoon in department stores!) and decided that it could be managed, by telephoning — he would make up for the time lost to-morrow. He was not so much needed in the office after the last mail was sent out, and sometimes had an hour or two to himself, as on the day of the fudge making.

"All right," he said, smiling down into the eager eyes that waited for his decision; "let's go shop-

ping, and do the job up brown while we are about it."

But then, noticing how pale the small face was still, he took a moment more to think. Too bad to disappoint her now, — but —

" At any rate," he finished at last, " we will go over to that nice little place I see opposite — that is, if we can get across the street alive — and get some hot chocolate, and rest a little; and then if your cheeks are pink enough to suit me, we will come back and plunge into this caravansery."

His plans thus satisfactorily arranged, he carefully extracted Mary from her tight-fitting refuge, and with his guarding arm still around her they started to breast the rushing torrent of humanity at the crossing.

Half-way across they came upon the big blue policeman at his post of duty, and Dick stopped to ask if he were looking for a lost child.

The policeman said he was looking for five. He seemed worried.

"Well here is one of 'em," said Dick consolingly. "You can cross the girl in the blue coat off your list," and safe and happy inside her shield, Mary smiled up at him, — grateful for the help he would have given her if she had found him in her time of need.

The big policeman smiled back at her — as people always did at Mary — and a minute later, when he threw up his hand to halt a great, trampling dray-horse, he stroked its velvet nose — much to the driver's surprise. And so both the horse and the policeman felt a little bit happier on account of Mary Merington.

As for Mary, she was holding her breath until the perilous passage was made in safety; but the moment her feet touched the sidewalk, — "What's a cavaransery?" she demanded.

But Dick was intent on finding a retired and

comfortable nook in the bright, warm little café where she could wait while he satisfied himself that Marigold and Ellen were really nowhere about the biggest store of all.

But first they found a telephone, and Mary, close to his elbow, listened with much satisfaction to the announcement that Miss Mary was with Mr. Saunders and would come home as soon as her errands were finished.

She thought it sounded very nice and grown up.

It was Helda who answered the telephone. Mrs. Merington was lying down, she said. No, no word had been received from Ellen.

It was strange Ellen had not thought of the telephone, — apparently her " head-piece " really was not all it might have been.

But she had searched, long and anxiously, for her charge, and had given it up only when (as Dick had guessed) she became convinced that Miss Mary was nowhere about the place, and therefore must have gone home.

She did not imagine how far up the street the bewildered child had drifted.

So she hurried back to the house, dragging with her the fiercely rebellious Marigold, and was met, not by Mary, as she had hoped, but by the welcome news of her safety.

"There! Now you see!" cried Marigold passionately. But poor Ellen did not see, — and in fact it was not easy to see, unless what Marigold meant was that the wonderfully good luck of Mary's being found by Dick proved that they would have found her themselves if they had stayed, which it did *not* prove, at all.

Meanwhile, Dick, at the telephone, had arranged for his leave of absence from the office, and then, leaving Mary in her snug corner, had made as thorough (and as swift) a search around the big store as the crowds permitted.

He returned, quite sure of the correctness of his guess (though he telephoned again, later, and made

sure of it), and found Mary eagerly awaiting him, her question ready on her lips.

"What *is* a cavaransery?"

Dick explained that he had only meant to compare the crowded store to the most confused and noisy place he knew of; but explanations brought new questions, and they took their chocolate with an accompaniment of camels, date palms, and white-robed Bedouins.

Next, after a careful survey of Mary's cheeks, Dick pronounced their pinkness satisfactory; and, much refreshed and cheered by the rest and the hot chocolate — and more than all by his comforting and protecting escort — Mary set blithely forth (still clasping his hand very tightly, however), to resume the delightful business of her Christmas shopping, which had been so long interrupted.

Hand in hand they safely recrossed the perilous street; and as they went, Dick, looking down in amused wonder at the buoyant little figure tripping

along beside him, full of happy confidence, announced his conclusion.

"I say," he observed thoughtfully, "I believe you have got as much stick-to-it in you as Marigold has, though it doesn't stick out all over you as it does on her."

But Mary was engaged in dodging between a stout old lady on one side and a Sunday-school class of small boys on the other, and did not hear him.

It must have been at least an hour later before Dick found time to realize, with much amusement, that he himself had become a genuine "Christmas shopper," just as busy and as eager as any of the "ten thousand lunatics" whom he had despised (while he was a philosopher).

He was carrying bundles, too, like all the rest — bundles too precious to risk loss or delay by having them sent home.

They were most businesslike shoppers, —

they wasted no time in looking around. Mary had her list, neatly written out on mamma's visiting-card, in the tiny blue purse which had its own little pocket inside the fluffy muff.

To check off every item on that list now seemed to Dick a business of the greatest importance, and he was devoting his whole mind to it.

He had grown cunning in contriving to be the last one admitted to the closely packed elevators, — because, as he said, you lost no time getting in, and you saved a lot getting out.

He had become expert in steering Mary dexterously through the crowd to the proper counter, with the least possible number of frictions and collisions.

Once she was safely placed in the front row next the counter, with Dick firmly braced behind her, to keep her from being pushed aside, his cares were at an end; for her own sweet face and pretty, gentle manners always secured prompt and

pleasant attention from even the crossest or busiest salesman.

Whoever was snubbed or neglected in the rush of the " holiday trade," Mary never was.

" I am afraid we have made you a lot of trouble," Dick said apologetically to one tired-looking saleswoman who had spent much time on them, and pulled down and opened many boxes without a hint of impatience.

" Not at all," she answered quickly, with a very pleasant smile. " She is an oasis in the day's work."

Dick returned the smile, understandingly. " In mine, too," he said.

A few minutes after, as they stood waiting for the elevator, he felt a pull at his hand, and looked down into a very puzzled, inquiring face.

" Dick ! " said Mary. " That lady said I was an oasis."

" Well, that's all right — so you are. What

seems to be the difficulty?" he asked, smiling.

"But, Dick!" Mary's eyebrows grew still more perplexed. "You said an oasis was a little green spot — with springs — "

"Just so," said Dick. "Yours are watch-springs, I believe. But never mind, — they are nice pleasant little spots, and everybody likes 'em. Here's the elevator — step lively."

And as she stepped obediently, and he followed, Dick smiled again, to see how perfectly unconscious she was of receiving any special attention.

She only knew that everybody was very nice and kind; and she went her way in serene satisfaction, marred only by the sorrowful reflection that came over her about once in five minutes, that poor Marigold was missing all *her* shopping and not having any of the fun.

But each time Dick managed to console her. It was much better, he said, — since it had hap-

pened so, — to get her errands all done first, and then next time they could devote all the time to Marigold's. It would be twice as easy.

So Mary would cheer up and go gaily on again, anxiously studying her list at every turn, and jubilantly checking off each article as it was bought.

CHAPTER XI

MARY'S METHODS

MEANWHILE Dick, who had begun the afternoon in such an un-Christmaslike temper, was quite unconsciously taking lessons in the spirit of Christmas by simply watching this one little Christmas shopper.

He was beginning to see what Mamma Merington had seen when she said Mary had "plenty of character," and there was more than affectionate admiration in his thoughts as he watched her — you might almost have called it respect, if she had not been such a very little person!

She knew precisely what she wanted, and she never changed her mind — their only difficulty was to find the exact thing.

Each gift had been planned beforehand, with

loving care, to suit, not her own taste, but the need or liking of the person for whom it was meant.

Among the rainbow-confusions of a "neck-wear" counter he was a little surprised to see her choose a very gay affair — a long, gauzy veil, or scarf, or something, he didn't just know what, of the most vivid red.

"Don't you think the blue is prettier?" he suggested, — "not quite so — er — lively?"

"Yes, *I* do, but Maggie likes red best," Mary answered simply, "because, you see, red is her color." And then he recalled that the Merington's cook was a most decided brunette, with the blackest hair and eyes and bright crimson cheeks. The gay scarf would make a splendid gipsy of her.

There was not much money in the little blue purse; what there was had been saved from her small allowance for many weeks for this one

great purpose, and it was all carefully apportioned to its many uses.

For Grandpa Vance her heart was set on a pair of easy, comfortable house shoes.

She had consulted Mrs. Pepperell, and she knew the size and the kind he needed for his poor lame feet.

She passed resolutely by all the temptations of stiff, shiny patent leather and bright colored trimmings, and the shoes she chose at last were big and homely; but they were of good soft leather and lined cosily with lambs' wool.

"You see if they are not just as easy as the old ones," she explained, "they won't be any comfort to him, — and that is what they are *for*."

There were two pair, one a little nicer than the other, and costing a little more. Mary chose the cheaper, though not without several wistful glances at the others. "But if we take those," she confided to Dick, "I shall have only forty

cents left for Ellen's present; and I want to get something *very* nice for Ellen, she is so kind to me."

When every item had been crossed off the neat little list, and the corresponding parcel safely stowed away in Dick's pocket or Mary's muff, and when at last they were in the car bound homeward, Mary began to realize that she was tired.

She leaned heavily against Dick's arm and her long dark lashes drooped; but she was in a state of blissful contentment with her afternoon's work, and still inclined to conversation. (Mary would have to be very tired indeed, not to want to talk.)

She chattered happily away about their Christmas plans. To-day's purchases had been only finishing up the last things, for " Mary 'n' Mary " were not of the foolish ones who put off everything until the crush and confusion of the last few days.

No indeed! It was much too important and too delightful a business for that. Ever since Thanksgiving, and even before, they had devoted much of their time and thoughts to it; — making their plans, writing and re-writing many lists, consulting with mamma, and working on the pretty things they were making with their own busy little hands for their " most special friends."

Besides the presents, there were many other Christmas joys to look forward to.

The cousins were all coming from New York to spend the whole of Christmas week with them; wasn't that perfectly lovely? And mamma was going to take them all to the theatre in a box, to see the children play, — wouldn't *that* be nice?

And oh, the Christmas boxes! That was the best of all. Mary described with glee how they had planned and filled them, — each packed full of its little white parcels with nuts and raisins and candy filling all the crevices and corners,

and a big wreath of holly, with its gay red ribbons, laid on top of all.

One box was for the Murray children, — Marigold's "step-family," with whom she had lived in South Berket before she became Mary's sister, — and the other was going down to the seashore, to the little Starretts.

This one seemed to have been particularly good fun, for the peculiar reason that nobody could remember exactly how many little Starretts there were or how many of them were boys.

Marigold had seen them oftenest; but even she could not be sure at this distance how many of the mingled families had properly belonged to the Amos Starretts and how many to Hosea and Lemuel.

Great care had been needed, therefore, to choose some gifts that would do for either boys or girls. Luckily goodies please everybody alike, and there were enough oranges and figs and candy to

make the box a large one, and its reception the merriest Christmas that ever came to that bare little house by the sea.

At intervals Mary roused herself to inspect her muff and feel in Dick's pockets, to make sure that all her precious parcels were safe.

Her greatest satisfaction, however, was in the bulky oblong bundle under his arm, which contained the wool-lined shoes, and promised so much future comfort for Grandpa Vance. "For he will need such a lot of warm things, if he is going to live in the country," she said with a little sigh.

"Country — how's that?" asked Dick. "Are the Pepperells going to move right away?"

"No, they haven't found their farm yet," Mary answered, looking troubled. "But they say they are going *some*where, certainly, in the spring. You see, Mrs. Pepperell has been cooped up here as long as she can stand it, and she just *must* have room enough to swing a cat."

Mrs. Pepperell's blunt phrases sounded very funny in Mary's gentle voice, and Dick laughed in spite of his sympathy.

"But why does Mr. Vance have to go with them?" he asked. "I shouldn't suppose farm life would suit him very well."

"No, Grampavance doesn't like it, I know," she answered sadly. "He *couldn't* be happy there, because he has to get so many books from the library; but mamma doesn't know where in the world she can find anybody else who would take such good care of him as Mrs. Pepperell does."

This seemed to be a quotation also, and it confirmed the idea Dick had already formed, that the Meringtons looked after the old gentleman's welfare and probably paid Mrs. Pepperell for her care of him.

"Well, it is too bad," he said sympathetically, as he signalled the conductor to stop. "I can't

imagine Grampavance — or Demosthenes either — living on a farm."

They left the car and hastened home.

As they approached the house they saw Marigold's watching face at the window, framed between masses of white azaleas; but it vanished quickly, and before they reached the steps she had flung open the door and was eagerly awaiting them.

Dick had meant simply to leave Mary at the door and go, but this neither she nor Marigold would allow. They seized upon him, and he had to go up to the library, and submit his pockets to their rummaging, then take his part in the unwrapping and display of all the packages — one of the most delightful parts of shopping, as every shopper knows.

When he did leave the house at last the short winter afternoon was over, and it was time to go home to dinner.

On the way, however, he stopped to make two purchases on his own account. One of them, indeed, took him a little out of his way and into the crowd again; but somehow he did not seem to mind that now. By some magic they had all changed from a "hustling mob" into a great many very good-natured, kind-hearted people, each one bent on giving pleasure to others.

Oh, yes, Dick had learned his Christmas lesson: but he could not stop to think about it now, — he was too busy. He was doing his Christmas shopping!

The first purchase was for Marigold; and Dick was extremely well pleased with his rather curious choice, and his certainty that it would exactly suit her taste.

It was not a "lady's knife," — a dainty pearl or ivory affair, — not at all. It was a stout, serviceable little jack-knife, with two strong blades of the best steel, and a handle of dark striped horn;

such a knife as he would use, and value, himself.

Dick understood Marigold pretty well; and he tucked away the little parcel in a safe inside pocket, with much complacency.

Soon after leaving the cutlery store, he passed a Japanese bazaar, whose windows blazed in the lamplight with gorgeous silks and embroideries, china, bronze, and lacquer.

He paused a moment, charmed by the dazzling array; and then his wandering eyes were caught and held fast by one little object, down near the glass, — a small, delicately modelled image of Buddha, seated on his lotus blossom, of pale green pottery, with a dull lustre like jade.

Dick gazed at it fascinated, and the plan he had had in mind for Mary was forgotten entirely; he went in and bought Buddha without delay.

As he tucked it carefully into the other inside pocket, he laughed quietly to himself. "'One

good turn deserves another,' " he thought. "*I* am giving *her* a ' little green spot ' now."

He happened to know a curious taste of Mary's — her love for images of any sort. Even the china dogs and rubber cats of her babyhood had been tenderly preserved, and there was a quaint little row of them ranged on the top of her tiny writing-desk, together with her dear little carved wooden bear from Switzerland, two figures of Mexican peons clad in real Mexican clothes, and other treasures, the gifts of family friends.

Dick knew that she would love the Buddha. As he looked at the heavenly calm of the little green countenance he smiled to see how like the expression was to Mary's own in her quiet moments.

Quite content with his peculiar choice of gifts, Dick pursued his homeward way; and as he went he felt for the little parcels in his pockets quite as often as any other of the ten thousand lunatics; and when he reached his room he was

just as eager to unwrap and have another look at them as any lunatic of them all.

As he stood under the gaslight, complacently examining the little green Buddha, he remembered with a feeling of wonder his mood of the early afternoon.

" Christmas is Christmas, after all," he thought, " and there's no sense in being grumpy and feeling left out of it. Just go ahead and do something for somebody, and you are getting your share of Christmas!

" It is rather a pity, though, there are only these two youngsters I *can* do anything for — and they have about everything in the world already."

" Scots! " said Dick suddenly, aloud, struck by a new idea; and he set Buddha down on his writing-table with a light thump for emphasis. " What an idiot I am, to say there's nobody else! I'll bet she won't get a thing — probably hasn't

any folks at all, except the ones that went out West, poor old soul."

He was thinking of Mrs. Belden.

It was not so easy, however, to think of anything suitable for a Christmas surprise to the "poor old soul." (Mrs. Belden was *not* old — not much older than his own mother would have been if she were living.)

He strongly suspected that what the poor lady needed most were practical comforts, such as he could hardly venture to offer. "Even cash probably wouldn't come amiss," he thought regretfully.

Since he could not do that, the only other plan was to select "something so useless and jolly she never would dream of getting it for herself."

He pondered the problem, sitting with elbows on the table and both hands in his hair, gazing thoughtfully at the green and tranquil features of Mary's gift.

And presently it seemed as though the calm, wise little face had really lent him some of its wisdom; for Buddha suggested the thought of Mary and Marigold, and that called up the picture of Marigold's face as he had seen it that afternoon in the window, framed by the delicate lace draperies and the clusters of azalea blossoms.

Flowers — growing flowers, that would live and bloom all through the cold, dreary winter months, — how they would brighten up the cold, dreary room somewhere at the back of the house, which was Mrs. Belden's "home." Dick did not know where it was, but it was sure to be a place that was not good enough for boarders.

He would get her an azalea, like those in Mrs. Merington's drawing-room. "Only pink," he decided. "It's all right for people who have everything they want and can get everything else, to have white flowers around; but if a person doesn't feel very rosy herself, what she needs is pink!"

CHAPTER XII

CHRISTMAS EVE

On Christmas Eve, just in time for dinner, the New York branch of the Merington family arrived.

They were all there, — Uncle John, Aunt Adelaide, Rodney, and the twins, Elinor and Elizabeth — whom Mary no longer envied their twinship, now that she had a dear twin of her own.

All the afternoon they had been impatiently expected. Everything was ready; all the Christmas parcels tied up with their pretty ribbons, duly labelled, and hidden away in the safest thinkable nooks; every window gay with its holly wreath and great bow of red ribbon, — that was enough in itself to fill small people with a fluttering sense of festivity — and the long dinner-table

also was gayly decked with holly and mistletoe.

A real Christmas snow-storm, thick and feathery, was falling out of doors; and the travellers came in amid a delightfully Christmassy flurry and tumult of welcomes, questions, and explanations of delayed trains, mingled with the stamping and shaking off of snow, the bundling off of wraps, and kisses and "how you've grown!" for all the children.

Mary had grown most, they said. She had the two inches of which her mother had boasted, and a little more since that, and had now exactly caught up with Marigold, making them more than ever "twins." And Rodney, too, they said, was "going to be tall like his father."

As usual, Rodney was taking things very calmly, and had little to say, while the four girls fluttered and chattered; but his dark eyes shone with the pleasure of the meeting, and when he shook hands with the dimpling, sparkling Mari-

gold, his quiet, "This is jolly, isn't it?" meant quite as much to her as his sisters' kisses and compliments.

Perhaps it meant a little more; there was always just the slightest bit of constraint between her and Elinor and Elizabeth, and she knew they did not yet feel toward her precisely as they did toward Mary.

Of course they all loved the sweet little cousin (she was still "little Mary," in spite of her two new inches), but while they liked the new cousin heartily, they had not yet got close enough to her to learn that she could be sweet, too.

Rodney had had a glimpse of that last summer, but like most boys he was a little shy and stiff at first, and they did not begin quite where they had left off three months before.

The dinner was a merry one, full of Christmas fun and stories, and just before they left the table Christmas began in earnest with the arrival of the

first present — an odd looking bundle which came by express.

It was a large canvas bag, securely corded up, very knobby in appearance and rattling with a wooden, clicking sound when you shook it.

The express tag read " Miss M. & M. Merington " and M. and M. had to be excused from the table instantly, to pick at, and pull, and at last cut the stout cords, to find without delay what was inside.

It proved to be even better than any of the guesses with which the children enlivened their efforts. It was half a bushel of hickory nuts; and enclosed with them a note from Mrs. Pepperell, in which she stated briefly that these shagbarks were the only thing Mr. Pepperell had got out of his last farm-hunting trip, — that she wanted to give the children something for Christmas, and that if they were anything like what young ones were when she was a young one, they would like

cracking nuts and picking out the meats about as well as anything. Theirs truly, M. J. Pepperell.

She had guessed right, — young ones were still the same. The five of them were clustered around the bag in a twinkling, handling and biting the hard shells cautiously, and clamoring for nut-crackers; while the two fathers, almost as pleased and interested as the children, began to tell stories of their boyhood days, when they went nutting and knew every hickory and chestnut-tree for miles around.

The four daughters listened with deep interest, but Rodney quietly and practically devoted his energies to getting these nuts cracked; and by dint of invading the kitchen for a hammer and a flat-iron, carpeting the dining-room with nut-shells thick as Vallombrosa's leaves, and driving Ellen to distraction in her efforts to clear the table, in half an hour they had a great bowlful ready for picks and fingers.

The elders were gathered in the drawing-room, but after one look at the big dish, with its shells to scatter, mamma pleasantly proposed that the children take them up to the library, where the wood fire would "make it seem more like old times."

That suited them exactly. Up-stairs they trooped; and when at Mary's suggestion they had turned out the lights, and gathered in a half-circle on the hearth rug in the red firelight, their satisfaction was complete.

Then Marigold had another happy thought, disappeared, and presently returned bringing five big red apples to roast on the hearth the way papa and Uncle John used to do.

They brought down all the sofa pillows to sit or lean on, and also the old "gray shawl," which was such a faithful family standby for every possible use. Nothing could be cosier.

Then they sat comfortably in the warmth of

the blaze, eating their nuts, watching the softly hissing apples, and talking.

There were moments when the conversation also grew a little warm; for the little New Yorkers were very human children — Elizabeth was just a bit apt to be fretful, while Elinor was extremely sure of her own opinions, and always ready to argue a point; and Rod, it must be confessed, was a trifle inconsiderate about teasing them both.

Once or twice Mary's eyebrows went up in a troubled fashion, and Marigold felt slightly uncomfortable for a minute, but nothing came of it.

At last, however, there really was a " squabble." Elinor had contradicted him pretty positively, and Rod, not choosing to be put down by a girl and a sister, answered her sharply.

For a moment or two the dispute was lively. Elizabeth took Elinor's part; and Mary and Marigold really grew very uncomfortable indeed.

"SHE THREW THE SHAWL OVER HIS HEAD, SNUFFING HIM OUT LIKE A CANDLE."

Mary, dear child, hardly knew how to squabble. Marigold did, — but she never squabbled with Mary, and in fact was quite out of the habit of it nowadays. She had not been really, seriously "mad" since the day of her dreadful and memorable quarrel with Rodney himself, last summer.

And Christmas Eve did seem such an especially bad time to be making oneself unpleasant: she wished Rod would stop it.

He was next to her in the semicircle, lying comfortably on his back on the old gray shawl, with his hands clasped under his head.

A loose end of the shawl was under her hand, and with a sudden impulse Marigold lifted it and threw it completely over Rod's head and shoulders, stifling his disputatious voice in its thick folds, and snuffing him out like a candle.

He stopped short, in the middle of his sentence, and lay perfectly still.

The other girls laughed at the sudden interruption. Elinor, her good humor quite restored, asked if that was what you meant by "shutting a person up," and Mary gayly quoted something about "suppressing the guinea pig," from her much loved "Alice" book.

But Rodney did not join in the laugh. Indeed, for a little while he was not there at all.

The sudden darkness and the feeling of the soft, heavy folds over his face had whisked him away like the "magic carpet" from the beautiful firelit room to a bleak rock on the seashore, circled by roaring surf, where under the warm shelter of that same old gray shawl he had done some of the most serious thinking of his thoughtless young life.

And then, as now, it had been Marigold's friendly little hand that wrapped him in its comfortable folds; and it was her generosity and her clear, unsparing sense of honor that had

saved him from making a worse fool of himself than he had already made.

No wonder Rod's memories held him silent for a little while.

Marigold had laughed with the others, as much surprised as they at his sudden docility, for she had fully expected a lively resistance, and had merely meant to stop the disagreeable discussion by a friendly scuffle.

But as she sat there quietly for a minute, while the rest resumed their interrupted chatter, the recollection that had silenced Rod came back to her too, and with it a little glow of pleasure in the thought of the friendship that had been pledged and sealed under the gray shawl, that day when the fog came in.

She wondered if Rod was thinking of it, too — and then she began to feel a little scared.

Did he think she had meant to remind him; and was he mad? Boys hate so to cry — perhaps

he thought it was mean of her to bring it up again.

Or perhaps he was not thinking of that at all, but was vexed by her reproof (for it had amounted to that) for plaguing Elinor.

She worried about this silently for awhile, and then, frightened into courage, determined to find out about it. Very quietly she slipped her hand under the shawl and laid it gently on the invisible curly head, as she had done that other day.

There was a moment's stillness, and then she felt it grasped as it had been before, by the rough boyish hand and held tight.

Now Rod was not in the least a sentimental or emotional person — no more so than most boys of fifteen — but somehow, hidden there in the dark, with no chance for anybody to say anything, it seemed easy to do it, and it answered as well as a whole lot of talking.

After a minute more of the friendly silence, he flung off the shawl and came out of his eclipse, sat up briskly and pulled Elinor's long braid in token of restored peace.

Meanwhile, his apple had scorched; but Mary and Elizabeth both insisted on giving him half of theirs, — thus making a nice little problem in short division for them, and in addition for Rodney.

Marigold felt very happy: Rod was not mad after all, — or at least if he had been her apology was accepted. She began to hope they would be "chums" again, as they had been last summer.

By breakfast time next morning she was comfortably sure of it, and not a cloud was left in her Christmas sky.

Soon after the leisurely Christmas Day breakfast was over, Mary and Marigold were surprised and charmed to receive a morning call from "Mr. Saunders."

Mr. Saunders was obliged to make his call an early and a short one, for his day was brimful of engagements; but he would not miss the pleasure of bringing his little gifts to the children himself, and seeing how enchanted they both were with his odd selections.

He had been invited to the family dinner that evening, but had to decline, for the Ambulance Corps was having a Christmas celebration, and Dick, who still belonged to the corps, was on the "Committee of Arrangements." Most of his day would be devoted to arranging.

But when Mrs. Merington asked him to come later in the week instead he promised, gladly and gratefully.

Mamma Merington was very sweet to him that morning, and the children clung to him, laughing and protesting against his going, until he had fairly reached the door.

Dick went off to the Armory in a very happy

frame of mind. "*Aren't* they the sweetest people that ever lived?" he said, half aloud, to an English sparrow which was blocking his way with a huge crumb. "Christmas *is* worth while, isn't it?"

The sparrow considered him light-headed; and perhaps he was. Perhaps he had not yet quite recovered his balance after the lovely surprise with which his Christmas had begun.

When he had opened his eyes that morning the first thing they rested on was a large mail parcel lying on his table. It had entirely escaped his notice when he had come in, late and tired, from a committee meeting the evening before.

It did not take long to wake up and reach out for that parcel; and then Dick stopped to laugh at his own eagerness, and the utterly unexpected and astonishing spectacle of himself sitting up in bed to examine his Christmas presents "like the little boys in the Christmas magazines."

Inside the box were soft white papers, red ribbons, and dainty holly painted cards with inscriptions which Dick read first, very carefully.

Both were in big, round, painstaking handwriting, and "Love" and "Merry Christmas" looked especially big and plain.

One of the soft white parcels contained a most magnificent pincushion, its cover wonderfully and mysteriously wrought of satin ribbons, lustrous and delicately tinted.

This was With Dear Love from Mary; and the long box for his ties, covered to match, with the same ribbons, bore Marigold's loving and laborious greeting.

Under these, on the bottom of the box, lay a large flat parcel. Dick opened it, and caught his breath with surprise and pleasure.

It was a photograph, large and exquisite — the dear, beautiful mother's face in the centre, with a charming childish head pressed close on

either side, and all three smiling out at him with happy eyes.

Dick sat and looked at it a long time, until his own eyes began to feel queer; and when he turned it over and saw the few words written across the back in Mrs. Merington's hand, he found he could not see to read them very clearly.

He rubbed his eyes hastily and laughed. "I must have forgotten what Christmas used to feel like," he murmured, apologizing to himself for his weakness.

He stood the photograph on his writing-table with hands that were almost reverent, and arranged the box and cushion on the bare bureau-top, where their dainty freshness made a startling contrast to the severe plainness of their surroundings.

With all this present preoccupation he entirely forgot about the little pot of rosy azalea which he had bribed the table girl to deliver to Mrs.

Belden the first thing in the morning; and when as he went down to breakfast she waylaid him in the hall, tremulous and half-tearful, and struggling to express her embarrassed thanks, he was honestly puzzled for a moment to know what she was talking about.

Then he remembered, — and in some ways it gave him even more pleasure than his own gifts had brought.

To have given so much happiness, and received so much, all before breakfast time, made a pretty complete Christmas already, he thought; and he went in to breakfast in a true " holiday humor."

CHAPTER XIII

LARRY

CHRISTMAS DAY was packed full of pleasures, and the Merington house was filled with festive tumult from morning till night.

After breakfast (for mamma had insisted on everybody's being fed first) came the rapturous excitement of sorting and undoing the Christmas bundles all heaped on the big library table.

Then came Dick's little visit, and afterward, several more morning callers. The children all went out to carry their gifts to Dorothy and other friends, and being joined by several of these, accomplished their errands in a riotous fashion that turned the walk into a romp, and snowballed all the way home down the avenue.

After a merry luncheon, interrupted by more

friends "dropping in" and out, there was a grand sleigh-ride far out into the pretty suburbs, in the keen bright air, full of tinkling bells, and the dazzle of the sunshine on new snow.

In all the children's revels Marigold was a leading spirit, quite as Mary Murray had been in the old days of the sand-lot in McGowan's Lane.

Marigold no longer felt shy of the New York cousins, or even of dry, silent Uncle John, who watched her so shrewdly but so kindly; and she firmly believed she was the happiest child alive.

Elinor and Elizabeth had never seemed so affectionate and free with her before, and as for Rod, — *that* had been settled before breakfast, as we were saying.

Rod had this winter what his sisters called an "athletic craze," and one of the symptoms was a brisk walk or run each morning before breakfast.

It was still early when he let himself in quietly at the front door, after his "constitutional,"

and started softly up-stairs, hushed involuntarily by the morning stillness of the big, warm, flower-scented house.

Half-way up the second flight, he looked up and saw Marigold above him at the head of the stairs, just coming down.

Her arms were full of white parcels tied with red ribbons, but she quickly freed one hand and laid her finger on her lips. "Merry Christmas!" she whispered, beaming down on him as fresh and radiant as the morning sunshine he had just left out of doors.

Rod continued to ascend, but slowly, with a hand on either rail, barring the way.

Marigold saw she was not to be allowed to pass, so she waited, puzzled but smiling, until he paused on the stair below her, his eyes just level with hers.

"Say, Marigold," he said — and stopped.

"Yes?" she waited, still smiling and expectant.

"Well — it's Christmas, you know," he went on, and paused again, eying her speculatively. "Say — should you mind if I kiss you?"

Marigold looked straight back at him, wide-eyed and earnest.

"Why, no, Rod — I'd *like* it!" she said; and Rod kissed her.

It was the first time; for that was the one difference he had ever made between the two little cousins — the only sign that she had not been born a cousin, like Mary, whom he had kissed, at meeting and parting, ever since she was a baby.

He went his way up-stairs, feeling a trifle silly, but pleased on the whole; and as for Marigold, she ran down to the library with wings on her feet and a happy little tune singing itself in her heart: — "He does like me, after all, in spite of my 'shutting him up,' — he likes me as much as Mary!"

Christmas week went on as gaily as it had begun, though Uncle John had to return to New York on the following day. He never could be away from business very long, for he had so much money that he wanted to make a great deal more.

Aunt Adelaide and the children remained through the week.

On the first afternoon came the long promised treat of "going to the theatre in a box," — which filled the children's highest ideal of splendor and pleasure.

It was a real Christmas play — a good old fairy tale, with sprites and elves and human children all mingled together in delightful confusion.

The pretty little theatre was filled with children; floor and balcony and boxes overflowed with parties of happy little folks and their accompanying mothers, big sisters, or other escort. Only in the upper balcony was a sprinkling of boys and young men.

Of all the merry parties none were prettier or gayer than that in Mrs. Merington's box; and many eyes turned often in that direction, during the waits between the acts, while the house was lighted.

Aunt Adelaide and " Aunt May " were the only ones who remained in one place long — Aunt Adelaide stately and modish in deep red, and Aunt May in her pretty light blue cloth with the lace and fur, which was the children's favorite. It was their party, and she had dressed to please them.

The rest of the box was a flutter of white frocks and curls and ribbons, — except for Rodney, and he, for the most part, sheltered himself behind Aunt May's chair.

Oddly enough he was the only one of the children who seemed to feel any self-consciousness, or to be aware that any attention was paid them. The others were too excited and interested to

attend to anything but their own party and the wonders of the stage.

It was just before the last act that Marigold, leaning comfortably over the velvet-cushioned railing, was observing the house attentively for the first time.

Rodney happened to be looking at her, and was the only one to see the curious change that came over her face.

It was lifted toward the upper balcony, and her eyes were wandering idly along the rows of strange faces, when suddenly they stopped and remained fixed. Her rosy, animated face grew set, and the pretty color slowly faded, leaving it quite white; while in her smiling eyes grew first wonder, then amazement, and at last absolute fear!

Greatly surprised and concerned, Rodney tried to see at whom, or what, she was staring so strangely, but it was impossible to tell, and just as he leaned forward to touch her arm and break

the spell, the lights went down and the curtain rose again.

The music and dancing and pretty final scenes claimed all their attention then until the play was ended; and afterwards, in the confusion of sorting and putting on wraps, the slow progress to the street entrance and waiting in the crowd for the carriage, there was no opportunity for more observation. And when they reached home other things were happening, right along, so presently Rodney forgot his intention of asking Marigold, when he got a chance, "what was up?"

She seemed as bright and lively that evening as before; but there were moments when her eyes looked strange again and she seemed not to hear what was said to her.

And through all the gay good times of the week that followed, Rod noticed that look at intervals, — the look of fear or dread, when she seemed for

the moment to be lost in painful thoughts, and then would come to herself and after a few minutes of rather nervous gaiety would resolutely put away her trouble, whatever it was, and be in her usual good spirits again.

He had given up the idea of speaking to her about it, for he had the feeling that "Marigold could manage her own affairs," and if she chose to keep them to herself she had a right to. Also, the chances were that she would, in spite of him.

It did not occur to him to consult Mary. If he had, it is possible that she could have solved the mystery for him: she had seen that look on Marigold's face before — on the day when Larry struck her, back in McGowan's Lane!

Yes, it was Larry again.

For a year and more, since he had fled from South Berket after his attempt to rob the Merington house, no one there had seen or heard of Larry

Murray, the big, surly step-brother, — the only person of whom Marigold had ever been afraid.

A year is a long time to a little girl, and she had rarely thought of him, in her happy life with the Meringtons; and yet she had not felt a moment's doubt when, as she raised her happy, careless eyes in the theatre, she found herself looking straight into his.

He had known her, too, she was sure of it; although when she first saw him he was merely staring at her with an expression of stupid wonder and perplexity. But as she looked she saw the recognition leap into his face, and he leaned forward with the sudden, savage lowering of his sullen brows which made her heart shrink once more as it had often shrunk in past days.

Larry hated her; — she believed he had always hated her, although she had never meddled with his things as the boys did, and tried only to keep

out of his way; and that fierce look proved that he had no more love for her now.

Did he know — oh, *did* he know — that it was she who had spoiled his plans on that last dreadful night — who had waked the Meringtons, and so forced him to leave the town in fear of arrest?

If he *had* found her out — ! She did not forget his bitter temper, and how revengeful he could be, even to a child.

When she had snatched Mary's necklace from his hand, had he not sworn to make her sorry for it? And was not that revenge still waiting?

Of course she did not flatter herself that the burglary had been planned solely for the purpose of punishing her, — but even there she had thwarted him again — and now he had come back! Marigold was naturally "plucky," and also buoyant, — she could not brood over troubles all the time. She also had pretty good sense, when she did not let herself get into a panic; so for

most of the time she was able to tell herself that her fears were nonsense; Larry could not harm her now; and it was very unlikely she should ever see him again.

So Christmas week was not spoiled for her by the encounter, and her enjoyment of the cousins' visit was genuine and hearty. It was only once in awhile that a sudden remembrance of the surly face and the ugly intentness of its look would spring into her mind and make her wince with the old, shrinking fear of him.

Toward the end of the week Rod, catching sight of her face again at a moment when she thought no one was near, changed his mind once more about interfering.

It was not like Marigold, he reflected, to be afraid of anything, — it must mean something serious to make her look like that. And girls didn't really know much, though she was about the brightest of the lot; so if she was in any real

trouble somebody ought to jump in and pull her out.

Somebody, in this instance, seemed to be himself; so when he saw a chance he did jump in, in his own cool way.

It was at Dorothy and Gilbert's party that he came to his decision; a real party, with an orchestra, and flowers, and everything delightfully grown up. It was almost their first party for Marigold and Mary, and they were in a state of enchantment.

Marigold's dark thoughts were soon banished again, and when Rodney next caught sight of her she seemed to be in the gayest spirits.

She was sharing a philopena she had found among the almonds with Gilbert, and laughing as though she had never had a trouble in the world, when Rodney joined them and, without any unnecessary words or argument, calmly possessed himself of Gilbert's share of the almond.

Naturally Gilbert resented this bare-faced robbery, and the rules of hospitality did not restrain him from saying so with emphasis; but while he objected Rodney ate the philopena.

"Now I've got you!" he said significantly to the laughing Marigold. "You've got to give me anything I want."

Gilbert, still somewhat ruffled, was quick to dispute this outrageous claim, but was coolly informed that he was not in this now, and therefore had no right to an opinion, — which certainly did seem rather unfair.

Marigold promised recklessly. She knew well enough that Rod would catch her, — he always did; and sure enough in less than ten minutes she had fallen into his carefully laid trap.

She was very curious to know what forfeit he meant to claim, but he would not tell her, although she teased him all the evening; and it was not until the next afternoon that she found out.

She had a little headache that day — a most unusual thing for her.

The mothers said that the excitement and fatigue of the party had been too much for her, and that they did not much believe in dancing parties for children anyway.

Then they tucked her up comfortably in the gray shawl on the big couch in the library and told her to take a nap while they took the other children over to the museum (a palace of delight!) — for Marigold begged earnestly that no one should stay at home for her, though Elizabeth offered and Mary pleaded to remain. So presently the big house was very quiet, and she was all alone.

A little later, as she lay, not at all sleepy, but gazing into the fire with sombre eyes, Rod strolled in and sat down beside her couch.

CHAPTER XIV

ROD TO THE RESCUE

He waved aside her inquiries and surprise that he had not gone out with Gilbert, and came directly to business.

"I'm ready now to collect that forfeit you owe me."

"Then now you will *have* to tell me what it is," she said, laughing. "What *do* you want, Rod?"

"I want you to tell me what has been the matter with you all this week," he said bluntly.

Marigold looked surprised, then confused. "That's not fair! — that isn't giving you anything," she protested.

"Yes, it is — it is giving me information," he argued. "You said 'anything I wanted.' Come now, you promised — now pay up."

She knew well enough what he meant, for she had been thinking of Larry at the moment Rod came in; but she felt very reluctant to explain, — Marigold never could bear to talk about her troubles. It was with some difficulty that he got it out of her.

Rod had never seen Larry, and had heard very little about the burglary affair; so it was necessary to go a long way back to make the story clear — a difficult task for poor Marigold.

And when he did understand the situation at last, Rodney was not precisely sympathetic. He seemed to find it hard to believe that she could have been so silly as to suppose that Larry Murray could or would go out of his way to injure her now, whatever he might have done when they lived together in the same house.

"But you don't know Larry — and you didn't see the way he looked at me," she defended herself feebly, crushed by his boyish scorn. "When

Larry says he'll get even with anybody he *always* does! and he hasn't got even with me yet for the gold beads.

"Besides," she went on quickly, as he started to speak, — "when he tried to pay me off that last time, it was not *I* — it was *they* — he was going to harm!

"I don't suppose he meant to steal their things just for that alone — to pay me off; but he knew it *would* hurt me, because I loved them so. That was what he had hinted at. Suppose he should try it again — mamma and papa — or Mary!"

She was very nervous, and her voice was beginning to shake; but Rodney was too much in earnest himself to notice it or to spare her.

"But what could he *do*, you goose?" he argued impatiently. "Don't you suppose they can take care of themselves, and you too?"

"But they don't know —" she faltered.

"Well, why don't you *tell* 'em then, and give

'em the chance?" retorted masculine common sense.

Marigold hesitated, confused by her own arguments.

"Because — I s'pose — I didn't *quite* believe he would," she began, struggling to keep back her tears. "At least, not all of the time. I was only afraid —"

"That is to say," Rod interrupted, quite out of patience, — "you have been getting up a grand scare just for the fun of being scared!

"It seems to me you haven't got much sense. Mary would have known better; she'd have gone straight to her father, and he'd fix things in a jiffy! Why, if you thought there even *might* be anything wrong, I don't think you are playing fair with Aunt May and Uncle Bob."

That was the last straw — it broke Marigold's heart.

She had a good deal of sense in spite of Rodney's

poor opinion; and she could not help feeling the truth of all he said.

She might perhaps have defended herself; for, much as she loved the dear new father and mother, she had not Mary's life-long habit of going to them with everything, good or bad, that happened to her. On the contrary, her very different life had taught her to stand alone and depend on herself as far as she possibly could.

Self-reliant and "spunky" by nature, she had also been thoroughly trained in a very severe school of conduct — the school of Tim and Johnny Murray. Stealing was bad, and lying was worse; but the deepest possible depth of disgrace was to be a cry baby, a fraid cat, or a tattle-tale.

But Marigold made no attempt to defend herself.

She was feeling ill and nervous, to begin with, and her self-control had been badly shaken by the effort of telling her story at all. She felt ashamed

and convicted of utter foolishness; but she was also pitying herself very much, and to be scolded, on top of all her other woes, did really seem too bad.

So, without intention, she avenged herself, and punished Rod swiftly and sufficiently for his unsympathetic severity, by burying her face in her little handkerchief and bursting into tears.

Rod's dismay would have been funny if there had been any one there to see it.

"For goodness' sake, don't!" he expostulated. "Here, hold on,—I didn't mean any—"

But Marigold had begun and couldn't stop. She almost never cried, but when she did she put her whole heart into it.

"I didn't mean to be a fool," she sobbed. "I thought I was trying to be brave. Oh, how I *hate* to be afraid!" and she struck the pillow passionately with her little clenched fist. "But how could I help remembering—?"

Rodney was quite at his wits' end. He took back everything he had said, — he tried patting her back; then he went in search of his mother's smelling-salts.

He seemed to remember having read somewhere something about burnt feathers and cold water, — but he was not sure whether those remedies were intended for precisely this sort of attack, and preferred not to run any risks.

Finally, he fell back on the unfailing masculine resource of argument; and when this produced not the slightest visible effect, he gave it up, and sat in silent despair.

At last Marigold grew calmer, and began to consider that if Rodney had thought her silly before, he could not think her present behavior much less so.

She moved the little wet handkerchief just enough to steal a timid glance at him.

Rodney sat with both elbows on his knees,

gazing ruefully at her. In one hand he grasped the gold-topped smelling-bottle, and the other held a folded newspaper fan. His forehead was wrinkled into a series of anxious parallels, and he looked desperately worried and unhappy.

It was a pathetic picture, but it only moved Marigold to a little hysterical giggle; and at the sound Rodney took courage for a fresh effort. This time he tried coaxing.

"Now look here, Marigolden, — if you will just quit this, and be a sensible girl, I'll tell you what we can do.

"If you don't believe me, will you believe Dick Saunders?"

Marigold took away the handkerchief and looked faintly inquiring.

"You say he knows this Larry — used to go with the same set. Well, now, if I tell Dick all about your seeing the fellow — it is to-night he is coming to dinner, isn't it? — and if *he* tells you

it's all foolishness being afraid of him, — will that set your mind at rest? "

Marigold was not exactly sure that to be told again that she was a fool would be very soothing; but still she had great faith in Dick — big, strong, friendly Dick.

In her secret heart she believed that *she* could make Dick understand her feelings much better than Rod could. But she shrank so from going over the whole painful story again, and she felt so tired and sick, that she was ready to submit meekly to anything he might propose; and she consented to let him consult Dick that same evening, and promised to tell mamma herself before she went to bed.

" That's a good girl! " said Rod in great relief, putting down his fan and offering her the salts. " Now I'll clear out, and you'd better be getting to sleep quick, if you are going to have a nap before the girls get back."

She did not want the salts, but like a real little woman she took them to please him, and thanked him with a tremulous smile; and Rodney patted her back once more, approvingly, and departed, quite believing that this last very sensible piece of advice would be immediately followed.

Of course, though, it was impossible to sleep; but an hour later when the girls came in, rosy-cheeked and cheerful, clustering around her with sympathizing inquiries, they found her eyes much brighter and a general air of relief and cheer about her.

Perhaps the relief of her worry had done as much good as the nap would have done; for her headache was better, and she was ready now to enjoy Dick's visit.

Dick was already a prime favorite with all of them; even Elinor declared he was just splendid. His ready good humor and boyish spirits made it easy to adapt himself to their years; and when he

was playing and laughing with them he really seemed no older than Gilbert or Rod.

After dinner they played some of the new Christmas games; and Rod, who had his promise to Marigold on his mind, found it hard to get a chance for the private interview he wanted.

At last, by a stratagem, they hid themselves in the dining-room, and the story was hastily but clearly enough told, before the laughing girls broke in upon them and took possession of Dick again.

His jolly laugh and the kind, quizzical look in his eyes gave Marigold the reassurance she wanted, and she felt comforted and protected even before he took the opportunity, as he kissed her good night, to whisper that he was going to make it all right to-morrow, and she was to go to sleep and not to bother her little head another bit about it.

Dick Saunders really was a good fellow — he considered it quite worth while to give some time

and trouble to set a child's mind at peace; and he determined to devote all the time he could get to-morrow to "looking up that scamp of a Murray."

So this was the reason why he was letting himself into his boarding-house and running briskly upstairs to his room at an unusually early hour on the following afternoon.

As his head rose above the level of the last landing he noticed that his room door was standing open; for a broad bar of dusty sunlight slanted across the passage and gilded the dingy paper on the opposite wall.

The little room was flooded with the deep, warm gold of the winter afternoon sun, and for a moment his dazzled eyes did not recognize the figure that rose quickly, in a nervous flurry, from the rocking-chair beside the western window.

It was Mrs. Belden; and while she stammered out her confused explanations and apologies for the liberty she was taking, Dick's eyes took in

with amused curiosity the novel aspect of his bare little room.

The comfortable, shabby, old willow rocker was not his — it had a womanish look.

A big, old-fashioned work-basket stood on his writing-table, and along the window-sill were ranged a row of spools, scissors, darning-egg and needle-cushion. The place looked actually cosy and lived-in.

"Why, of course, Mrs. Belden, you are perfectly welcome to come in here every day if you like!" he said heartily, in response to her incoherent explanations about her poor eyes, and her room being so dark afternoons, and the better light for sewing at this window.

She was gathering up a heap of work from the bed, evidently hoping to conceal it in her apron before he should notice it; but Dick's eyes were too quick. The pile was composed of his own stockings!

"SHE WAS GATHERING UP A HEAP OF WORK, EVIDENTLY HOPING TO CONCEAL IT."

Then it was Dick's turn to blush and stammer.

"Why, really, Mrs. Belden, this is awfully kind of you! You ought not to take such a lot of trouble for me —" he began: but Mrs. Belden suddenly dropped the pile of mending on the counterpane again, and faced him with the desperate courage of a timid little animal that finds itself in a corner.

"Now, Mr. Saunders, don't you say a word; — there's nothing to thank me for. You don't know what a pleasure it is to a lonely, useless person like me, without a soul but myself to think of, to find something I *can* do for somebody!" There were real tears of earnestness in her eyes.

Dick could partly understand her feeling; but he did not understand that his own little pink azalea bush was bearing this new strange fruit, and it was with the simplest gratitude that he answered warmly:

"And you don't know what it is to a lonely young chap like *me*, to have somebody doing things

for him! It feels mighty homelike, I can tell you.

"Now please don't disturb yourself, — I am going right out again. I only came in to leave these;" and before Mrs. Belden could do more than make an uncertain motion toward her spools and scissors, he had put down his bag, picked up his overcoat, and was running down-stairs again, laughing to himself.

"Poor 'Aunt Emily,' how scared she was, to be caught at it! But what an old dear, to darn a fellow's stockings for him, — that's the kind of an aunt to have!

"And now for a little detective business and Mr. Laurence Murray!"

CHAPTER XV

DICK'S POOR LADY

DICK was not at all sure of success in finding Larry himself; — that young man would, most likely, be "laying low" as Dick put it. With a possible arrest for burglary hanging over him, he would of course keep carefully away from his old haunts.

What Dick intended was to hunt up some of "the old crowd" whom they both knew, who would know his whereabouts if any one did, — and what he confidently hoped and expected was to discover that Larry had already left town again.

But as it happened, he ran up against the very man he wanted, Larry himself, almost at once.

Larry was staying, he found, with the old-

time chum whom he had selected as the most hopeful source of information.

There was not much change in Larry, either for better or worse, in the year that had passed since his flight from Berket, and Dick looked in vain for the ugly scowl which had so shocked poor Marigold.

Larry was very good-natured and friendly, seemed genuinely glad to see him again, and described his adventures with perfect frankness.

After his last escapade in South Berket he had come directly to the city and shipped on a cattle steamer, as the quickest and easiest way of disappearing from public view.

Since then he had been drifting about on different steamer lines, and was now a stoker, — a much better job. In fact he seemed to regard himself as quite a respectable and prosperous person.

He had even gone out to Berket once — "to

take some kickshaws he got in England to the old woman and the kids, for Christmas," he explained, a little shamefacedly; but Dick gathered that it was an evening call, and had not been repeated. Larry had no wish to run against Constable Barstow, or to refresh the memories of his other Berket acquaintances.

He was stopping in the city only between voyages, and would be sailing again in a day or two.

Dick had not meant to say anything about Marigold; but Larry himself presently introduced the subject.

He had been very much astonished and puzzled by the sight of his little stepsister, Mary Murray, in her dainty white dress, and in such fine company; for he had known nothing of her adoption by the Meringtons until he went to Berket, some days after his visit to the theatre.

Dick soon perceived that the frown which Marigold's fears had so magnified had meant

nothing more than that, — astonishment and perplexity. Larry's brows were heavy, and his face, even at its best, was not a particularly amiable one to look at.

He had read her face better, — the theatre was small and the distance between them had not been great; and he was curious to know why the kid was scared to death at the sight of him.

Dick told him why — rather bluntly, for Dick's sympathies were with Marigold.

He did not betray her connection with that last stormy night's work; there was no need for Larry to know that, for the matter of the gold beads was enough in itself to explain her fear; it was not a pretty incident.

But Larry took it all as a very good joke, and laughed.

"Why, what would I want to harm her for?" he asked in genuine wonder. "Mary's a good

enough sort, if she *is* a pepper-pot. You tell her she's no need to be scared of me.

"Look here," he added with a sudden inspiration, "suppose I send her a present; that ought to square her. Here, you tell her I brought her this from London."

The flag of truce he selected looked more like a battle flag, perhaps; for it was a woollen neckerchief, printed like an Indian shawl, in the most gorgeous Oriental colors. But Dick gladly took charge of it, and promised to deliver it with Larry's message of peace (at least, the truthful part thereof).

They urged him to stay with them, promising him a jolly evening, but Dick had no taste for their sort of jollity, and he said good-by and got away as soon as he could with civility.

When he went up to his room that evening, the traces of Mrs. Belden's visit had nearly all disappeared. The sociable spools were gone from

the window-sill, and the work-basket from the table.

But the comfortable, shabby, old rocking-chair was not gone, and he guessed that she had left it for his comfort. On the bed, too, lay the pile of mended and neatly folded stockings.

He sank down in the cushioned depths of the chair and picked up one of the stockings to inspect her work, — amused, and pleased, and grateful, all at once.

Dick was only a man, — and not the useful kind of man that can do such things for himself, either, — but even a man could see, with one glance at that heel, that this was not the sort of darning he had ever seen before. This was art!

The threads were so finely and smoothly woven he could hardly see where stocking left off and darn began. His much abused hose were as good as new — even a little better.

The next morning he thanked Mrs. Belden

again for her friendly service, and complimented her on her beautiful work, truthfully declaring he had never seen anything like it.

The poor lady flushed to the eyes and looked fairly happy at his praise.

"Why that was nothing extra," she protested; "and I just enjoyed doing it. I love to sew; and I used be a masterhand at all kinds of fine needlework."

"I wonder you don't do something of that sort — —as a business," said Dick frankly. "There must be plenty of people who want it in a city like this. Why don't you try it?"

She smiled sadly, and shook her head. "I *have* tried," she said, sighing; "but there are too many women like me, in such a big city, who don't know how to do anything else. There is no chance for a stranger."

"Well, you know how to do that all right, — that's a sure thing!" said Dick consolingly; and

he went off to the office with a new idea in his head.

He made his dinner call at the Meringtons' very promptly, for he not only wanted to give Marigold her present, and report his interview with Larry, — he had another purpose also; he wanted a little talk with Mrs. Merington.

Marigold had kept her promise to tell mamma all about her doubts and fears, and had been soothed and cheered by her tender reassurances.

Now Larry's astonishing present, and Dick's good account of him, removed the last shadow of her trouble. Once more she was the happiest child in the whole world.

This was the last of her Christmas gifts, and by no means the least. Indeed, it presently formed one of the chief ornaments of the children's room, in the shape of a splendid sofa-pillow, and as often as Marigold saw it it repeated its comforting message of peace and security.

It had another message, which was also good for her, although not quite so pleasant.

Marigold was, as her father had said, "a born leader." She certainly did like to manage other people, and make them do things her way.

Rodney was much larger and older than she, and because of that, and because she admired him and was so proud of being liked by him, it was natural that she should feel a little self-satisfaction in knowing that in their quarrel he had been in the wrong and she had put him right.

But Marigold was a very honest little girl — honest with herself as well as others — and to be made to see, as she did now, that she herself could be foolish, and need Rodney's good sense to straighten out her tangle, was not a bad lesson for her.

The visiting cousins had now returned to New York and the family were again alone; so there was a nice chance for that little talk Dick wanted.

The children naturally felt a trifle flat after the excitement of the long visit, and they hung about their friend more quietly than usual while he talked with mamma.

What he wished to know about was sewing — fine sewing.

Mamma Merington opened her beautiful eyes wide, and laughed at him; but Dick was very much in earnest.

No, but really, — didn't she have a lot of such work to be done, for the house and the children?

"My dear boy, you cannot possibly imagine *how* much!" she sighed, still laughing.

Then Dick began to tell her about Mrs. Belden — of whom she had already heard, through the children, after the occasion of the fudge.

He described the beauty of those darns with such earnestness and enthusiasm that she laughed again, irrepressibly; but she was very sympa-

thetic and interested, and willingly agreed to do anything that was possible to help.

There was a whole new set of tablecloths and napkins, waiting to be French-hemmed, that very minute, — and *always* something to be done about the children's clothes. The children, listening and silent, smiled with the vague but pleasant perception that by the simple and easy process of outgrowing their clothes they were helping " Dick's poor lady."

Of course Mrs. Merington could not be unfair to her present seamstress; but by speaking to one or two friends she was sure that could be made all right, and the work divided. She would see about it, and would call on Mrs. Belden herself as soon as possible.

She kept her word; and at their own earnest request — for they were both deeply interested in Dick's poor lady — she took the twins with her.

The sight of them, sitting side by side in their

blue coats and hats on Mrs. Frost's blue plush sofa, seemed to Mrs. Belden as she entered the parlor one of the pleasantest pictures she had ever seen.

She was fully as much interested in the little pair as in the welcome offer of employment, and turned eagerly, when the discussion of business was finished, to try in her shy, pathetic way to make friends with them.

It was not difficult; they also were all ready and willing to be friends, and before many minutes they were standing beside her, chattering away as sociably as possible.

They told her all about Dick's Christmas presents, and she, in return, told them of the little pink azalea, to their great delight.

Mamma too was touched and pleased by the little story. "What a dear, thoughtful fellow he is!" she said; and Mrs. Belden fervently agreed with her.

The matter of the fine sewing was quickly and most satisfactorily settled. Mrs. Belden was glad to agree to any terms proposed, and could hardly believe in her good fortune, to be earning so much money by doing the work she liked best.

When they went away the children kissed her, and begged her when she came to see mamma to come in the afternoon, when they were at home from school.

It was a quaint friendship, but it lasted. Mrs. Belden loved children, and had sadly missed her little nieces. Her heart went out to these sweetly friendly little people; and they, perhaps feeling her need of their love, responded with readiest affection.

By her request, and with mamma's permission, they soon learned to call her "Aunt Emily" — the endearing name she had not heard for so long; and when she came to the house about the sewing, they claimed her as their visitor, and held

long confidential conversations, leaning against her knees or sitting close beside her before the library fire.

It was on one of these occasions Mary learned a fact which excited great interest and curiosity in her little mind.

That evening she popped in between papa and his paper, in the way they both enjoyed so well, and laid her perplexities before him.

"Papa, please tell me what is a mortgage?"

"A mortgage! Where in the world have you picked up that word, Marykin?" (Papa was apt, when Mary took his breath away like this, to answer her question with another.)

"It is Aunt Emily's, papa, — she has one on her farm. It is a very poor old farm, but it has a big wood-lot, and a house and two barns, a big one and a little one, and this mortgage on it. And Marigold thinks it must be some kind of animal, because Mrs. Belden says it takes so

much interest, — but I wasn't sure, and I wanted to know.

" Anyway, it is something very unpleasant, and she wishes it wasn't there; because she is going to sell the farm and then she is afraid it will *eat up all the money!* And she won't have any left, just think!

" It seemed to make her feel bad, so I thought I wouldn't ask her any questions, — I'd just wait and ask you. But why should she *let* it eat up her money, papa — and what kind of an animal is it? "

Mary paused to catch her breath, and papa stopped laughing to try to answer her questions.

" But it is really a very serious matter, Robert dear," said mamma, half reproachfully. " Poor woman, no wonder she looks so despondent and harassed. I supposed the old place was sold when she left it. I wish we could do anything more to help her. Let me see, she might em-

broider those — " and mamma fell to musing, while papa seriously explained to Mary that the mortgage was a debt, — a sum of money which Mrs. Belden owed to somebody; and if she could not pay it otherwise the farm must be sold in order to get the money to pay it with.

" I see," sighed Mary, — " and then she wouldn't have the farm or the money or the mortgage either, — not anything at all! Isn't it too bad! "

CHAPTER XVI

MARY'S PLAN

"MISS MARY, Mrs. Belden is here, and she wants to know if Mrs. Merington left any word for her about matching the doilies. Do you know?"

Miss Mary sprang to her feet — she was sitting flat on the floor — and from her lap dropped a shower of fish, large and small, one turtle, two frogs, an eel, and any number of polliwogs.

They fluttered softly through the air, and fell silently to the floor, — for they were made of white paper, and the green carpet of the library was the lake in which they swam.

The scissors which had made them fell too, with a little clash; and in their fall they disarranged a lovely circular basin of the lake's bed, bordered

with fringing grass and ferns, also cut from paper.

Marigold's place was close by, of course, and was like Mary's, except that her taste ran more to water-lily pads, as being simpler in form, and therefore easier to cut out, than ferns.

For the same reason she was fond of starfish and sea-urchins, and her pool was a strange mingling of salt and fresh-water creatures, the flounder and the horn-pouts living sociably as next-door neighbors.

"We are coming, Ellen, — we'll come right down. Please don't step on the turtle. Oh, Marigold, now we will tell her our plan and ask her if she won't. Oh, won't it be nice if she will!"

They ran down-stairs together, and welcomed Mrs. Belden with a joyful eagerness that warmed her heart.

The lonely woman was already very fond of both the friendly, affectionate little girls, and when

they begged her to come up and make them a visit since their mother was not at home, she was really glad to do so.

They put her in the big chair before the fire, and then leaned comfortably over either arm of it to talk to her.

"For we have something *very* important to ask you," they said.

"We were going to tell mamma as soon as she came home, and ask her some things; but you came first, so we think we'd better not lose any time, — because it's *so* important!"

They had begun together, as usual, in their hurry to lay their plan before her; but Marigold suddenly stopped herself, with generous determination.

"It is all Mary's idea, every bit of it, — she thought of it first; so she ought to have the telling," she declared; and Mary began, with an almost solemn sense of personal responsibility.

"Now, to begin at the very first beginning — — papa always says I begin in the middle and talk both ways — the *very* first thing is, would you like to adopt a grandfather?"

Mrs. Belden fairly gasped. She had not expected a beginning which so directly concerned herself.

Before she had time to ask a question Marigold struck in, quite forgetting her heroic resolution to keep still.

"He is very old, but he is awfully nice — "

"And he doesn't like the country any more than you do, because his feet are cold and there aren't any books there," Mary added.

Mrs. Belden put one hand to her head and waited for more light.

"Oh, I forgot," said Mary, going a little way back of the beginning, as she noticed their visitor's bewilderment. "You don't know who it is, do you? We mean Grampavance."

Then Mrs. Belden collected her wits and began to recall what Dick Saunders had told her about his skating trips, and the dear old gentleman, and the people he lived with; while still the rippling flood of Mary's speech poured on.

"And Dick said you said you would be so happy if you had a little, warm house all alone" (Mary was too delicate to repeat all Dick had said, about her *un*happiness in a big, cold house), "so we thought why couldn't you let Mrs. Pepperell have your farm, and you take her house, and then Grampavance stay right where he is, and you adopt him and take care of him. Wouldn't that be nice, don't you think, Aunt Emily?"

Two pairs of eyes, wistful gray and shining brown, were fixed on Mrs. Belden's face, watching in breathless anxiety for some sign of approval or displeasure.

But Mrs. Belden's face hadn't any expression at all on it at that moment. She seemed dazed

by the suddenness and eagerness of their appeal, and their hopeful expectation that she would instantly fall in with their plan.

If her sober, monotonous habit of life and thought had been a plant in a flower-pot, and somebody had knocked it off the shelf, she could not have felt more upset and scattered than she was by this startling proposal.

The proposers of it went on eagerly, without a pause.

"You haven't any grandfather, you know, and Grampavance hasn't anybody at all," Mary urged, "and this way you would both have a family. Don't you think it is nice to adopt people? *We've* been *so* happy since we adopted Marigold," — and her twin sister's clear, honest eyes answered her loving smile across the arms of the big chair.

Still Mrs. Belden found nothing to say, beyond one or two bewildered questions, which brought

out a few plain facts about the Pepperells' plans and wishes.

These helped to steady her mind a little, but still she felt helplessly confused between the alluring picture they were drawing of quiet home comfort, and her own hopeless conviction of its impossibility. Anything so pleasant must be impossible.

Mrs. Belden was not naturally hopeful, and her sad experience had led her to believe only in the unpleasant possibilities of life.

She now presented the first and gravest objection that occurred to her grown-up mind. (Grown-ups always think so quickly of all the objections to nice plans!)

"But the Pepperells wouldn't want my farm. You don't know what a lonesome, out-of-the-way old place it is, — and all run out, the way it is, too," she said.

"Yes, but Mrs. Pepperell says she is ready to

take 'most anything now, she is so discouraged about finding what she wants," Marigold hastened to assure her — and then stopped, conscience-stricken, to consider whether that sounded quite polite. She went on hurriedly, "She says that all she asks is that there aren't any trolley cars whizzing and banging around, and the neighbors' washing won't blow over into her back yard as often as Monday comes around."

"Well, I guess my place would just suit her, then," said Mrs. Belden, smiling and sighing together. "But then the difficulty would be on my side. It's no use, dears, I never could afford to pay rent, never in the world, even if I sold the farm."

Mary in her turn hesitated between politeness and persistence — but they had planned it all out so beautifully, Marigold and she; it seemed so easy and so beautiful to them that she could not give it up.

So — "There is Grampavance's board, you know," she suggested timidly. "I don't know just how much it is, but I think it must be pretty much, because mamma says it is 'such a responsibility.'"

Mrs. Belden smiled again at the long word, but still she shook her head. She was a grown-up, and the objections would crowd in.

But the wonderful plan was a pleasant "s'pose," as the children called their make-believes, and for awhile she let them prattle on.

She was just rising to go when a sudden cry, almost a little scream from Mary, made her drop into her chair again in her surprise.

Mary's eyes were so big with the splendor of her new plan that they looked fairly black, and her cheeks were like a wild rose in the rain.

"*Oh*, how lovely! You could have him too — why didn't we think?" she cried, incoherent with haste. "You can adopt him too, for an aunt or

something, and he *said* you must have been a nice kind of an aunt! Wouldn't it be splendid? Oh, why doesn't everybody adopt somebody, and all be happy?"

"What under the sun are you talking about, Mary?" gasped poor Mrs. Belden, — but Marigold was quicker to guess.

"Dick! Dick!" she cried, and clasped her hands in delight.

Mrs. Belden stared at them both, almost overcome by the rush of their swift changes and improvements; but the little girls, whose daily food was new ideas, big or little, just as it happened, instantly adopted this new and most charming one, and began at once to fill in the picture, s'posing every detail in their favorite fashion.

In three minutes they had their imaginary household so thoroughly planned out that Mrs. Belden felt as though the first month's rent were already due.

"And you will all be so happy and comfy," cooed Mary rapturously. "Don't you love Dick, Aunt Emily, — he is so dear and good?"

"He is the best young man I ever saw," answered Mrs. Belden heartily, and laughing outright at the summary way they were disposing of him, "but how do you know he wants to be adopted?"

"Oh, I am sure he will." Marigold said confidently, "because he hates — I mean he would love to live in a little house, instead of *any* boarding-house."

(It was Aunt Emily's cousin Sarah's boarding-house, and nothing but good must be spoken of it.)

"Well, we'd better not settle it to-day," said Mrs. Belden at last, rising as she spoke. "It might be just as well to speak to Mr. Vance about it, and Mr. Saunders, too, before we adopt them; and it's probable Mrs. Pepperell would have something to say about it, too."

She was picking her way among turtles and starfish toward the door.

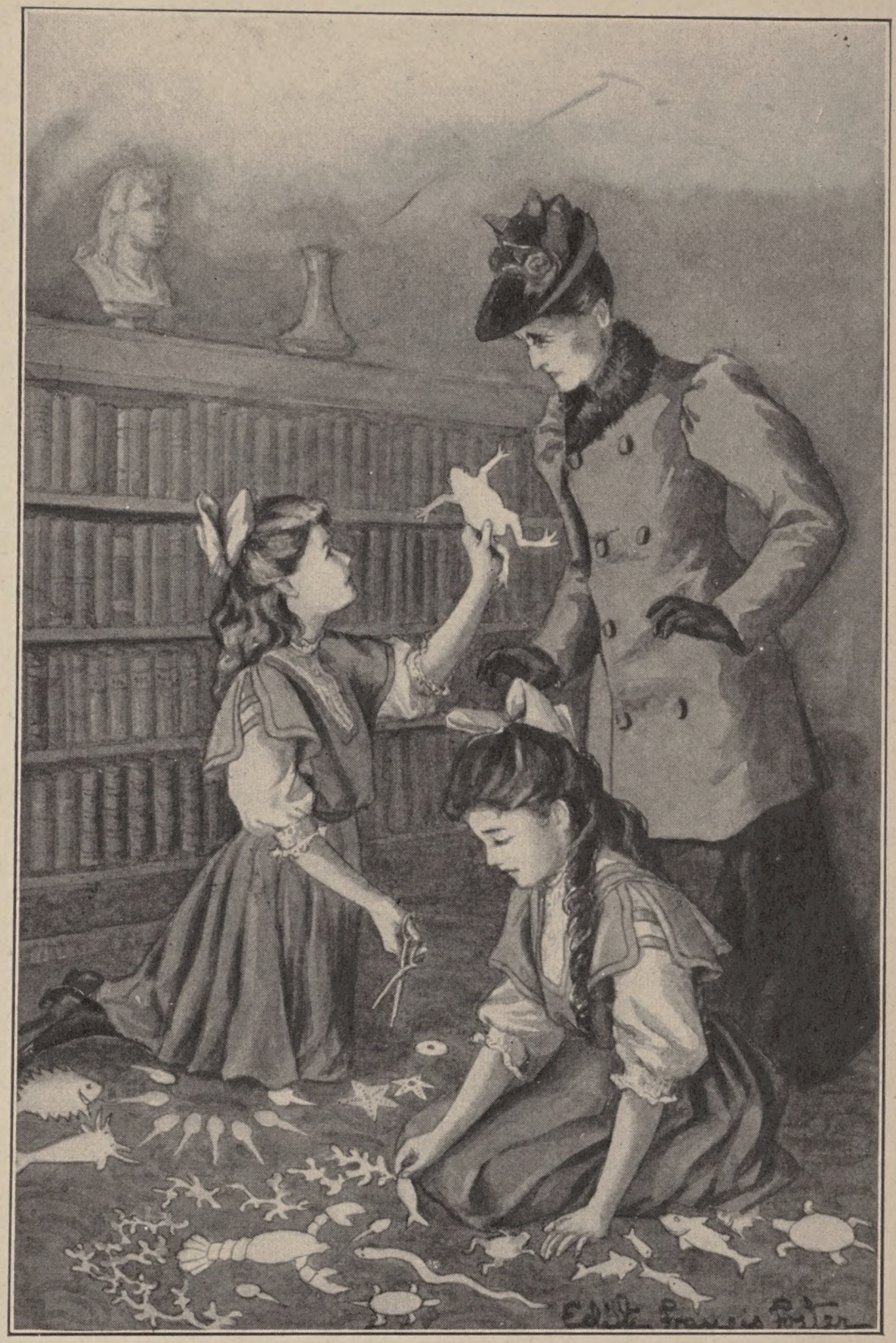
"Yes," the twins agreed, very seriously (though she had not really meant it), "we will ask Mrs. Pepperell and Grampavance, and we will ask mamma, too, the very minute she comes home — and *she* can make it all come just right!"

"And oh, please, before you go — you lived in the country, so you know all about frogs, — won't you please show me how a frog's front feet go?"

Mrs. Belden looked really alarmed for a moment. She thought some new, strange sort of gymnastics was being asked of her.

Then she saw that Marigold was holding up to her a little paper object, whose front feet certainly did look very funny. If they were really put on that way a frog would not be likely to "go" at all.

Mrs. Belden laughed — a wonderfully cheerful,



"'PLEASE SHOW ME HOW A FROG'S FRONT FEET GO?'"

hearty laugh it was, for her — and took the poor little frog in her hand to examine more closely.

"Why, I am sure I never tried to make a frog in my life," she said, "but if you will give me a pencil I will see how much I can remember."

She put on her glasses and bent over the paper, quite absorbed in the effort to draw a proper frog; and the two pretty heads, copper-brown and black, bent also, close together, and almost between her and the paper, so intent were they on the result.

It was at least a great improvement on Marigold's attempt, and she took the scissors and cut it out with immense satisfaction.

"This is the mother frog," she explained as she dropped on the carpet at Mrs. Belden's feet to install the mother in her watery home, "and these polliwogs are all her little children."

Mrs. Frog seemed to have a very large family, and when they were neatly arranged in a close

ring around her, all the little tails pointing outward, they formed a very pleasing domestic circle.

Mrs. Belden was interested, and quite pleased by her success in this new art.

"Now I ought to make something for Mary, too; what shall it be?" she offered rashly.

She had got herself into difficulty now, to be sure; for Mary's choice wavered between a flying-fish and an alligator, with neither of which strange creatures was Aunt Emily acquainted.

While she was still wrestling with the problem, the children acting as very earnest but hardly helpful critics, the street door opened and closed again without their hearing it, and presently dear Mamma Merington walked in upon them, pretty and rosy in her winter wraps and furs.

She did not seem much surprised at the tumultuous ardor of the children's welcome. They were usually overflowing with news and chatter after a few hours' separation.

Mamma was grown-up, of course, and she did sometimes see objections to the nicest plans; but she always saw the niceness first.

When all the beauties of their wonderful scheme had been set before her, and she had laughed gently at their excitement and tried to calm their impatience, she surprised Mrs. Belden by beginning to question her seriously about the farm, — its size, the price, the mortgage, and so on.

"It is not absolutely impossible," she said thoughtfully. "I really think it might be worth while for Mr. Pepperell to see and talk with you, — though the place is larger than I think he wants. Still, if half of it is woodland — Well, we must see him first of all. If you *could* come to an agreement it would be so much better for you than to sell at auction."

Then as the twins' excitement began to bubble up up anew she added, laughing, "Don't be in quite such a hurry, chickens, — everything can't be

done in a minute. You shall tell papa your plan this evening, and if he thinks best we will speak to Mr. Pepperell. Build all the air-castles you please, but remember we can't move into them until we hear what Mr. Pepperell says."

They went on building the air-castles then — it was impossible not to. The idea which had started in Mary's little head was taking possession of them all. They thought of a dozen ways in which it would be a benefit to all concerned; and it was at least an hour later when Mrs. Belden went away, her head in a whirl, and quite forgetting the doilies.

The children's heads were so full of it they could think and talk of nothing else; and when papa came home they would not let him think or talk of anything else either, until he had considered and discussed the plan in all its bearings.

He thought, with mamma, it was "just possible" the Pepperells might like at least to look

at the place, and he agreed that if, by this or any other arrangement they could make, Grandpa Vance could be transferred to the care of Mrs. Belden (whose years of nursing her invalid father so well fitted her for the charge), " it would be a good thing for everybody's comfort, all around."

Mamma and Mrs. Belden had already given up the idea of exchanging houses, which had so pleased the children's fancy, — a small flat here in the city would be much better for Mrs. Belden than the Pepperell's suburban house.

Then what the Meringtons would pay her for the care of Grandpa Vance — and Dick's board, if he should become her boarder — and the saving on heating and lighting —

Papa and mamma were quite absorbed in the discussion of these business and money sides of the question, which Mary and Marigold did not understand at all.

But they did understand that their great plan

was being considered quite seriously and respectfully and they were jubilantly happy.

"Right here in the city! We could go see them," murmured Marigold.

"And she would cut us out animals, and all the fishes we wanted!" whispered Mary, whereat papa laughed and hugged her, and declared his belief that the whole thing was just an artful scheme of hers to stock her aquarium.

"And how much easier it would make my mind, dear, to have him so near, instead of away off in the country; and in such good hands, too," mamma was saying, when she interrupted herself and broke off suddenly.

"If we talk another word about it this evening, these children will not go to sleep to-night. Look at their eyes! Come, kiss papa good night, and then fly, chickens, fly!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE WORKING OUT OF IT

THE very next day — for if anything were to be done it must be done quickly — Mrs. Merington went out to see Grandpa Vance, and had a talk with Mrs. Pepperell.

Mr. Pepperell then came in town and talked with Mrs. Belden. Mrs. Belden talked with Dick Saunders. Everybody was talking at once.

Next, Mr. Pepperell took a day or two out of the shop, and went up to see the farm.

Everybody was in a dreadful state of suspense until he came home. The children could hardly eat or sleep.

As for Dick, he was so charmed with the plan that his judgment, Mrs. Belden told him kindly but plainly, "wasn't worth a row of pins. He

was just about as childish as Mary and Marigold about it, and couldn't be made to see that there were any obstacles in the way."

However, he was grown up enough to realize that the Pepperells *might* be obstacles if they did not like the farm — for if they did not, and it had to be sold at auction, the dreadful mortgage would really "eat up" so much of it, and Mrs. Belden had so very little money besides that she could hardly venture on taking a house of her own.

So Dick awaited the verdict as anxiously as any of the rest.

"Well, Mrs. Merington, it's like this," Mrs. Pepperell reported at last. "The place *is* larger, considerable larger, than what we'd made up our mouths for. And there's no denying the land's been skinned by that slack, shiftless critter that's on it now. And the buildings are in pretty poor shape, and the barn's *got* to be shingled before another winter.

" But Mr. Pepperell he's taken a terrible notion to the place, and he's talked with the men around there; and he thinks he can sell enough wood off that wood-lot to keep us going till we can get things into shape.

" He's a good farmer, Mr. Pepperell is, and he says that land ain't so poor as it looks to be now. A man with faculty ought to be able to make a good living there. But it stands to reason, Mrs. Merington, no farm was going to make a living for two sets of people — owner *and* tenant — and one of 'em here in the city, never laying eyes on it. If you expect to live off a farm you got to live *on* it ! "

The wide-eyed, listening children could hardly make out whether all this meant yes or no. Still, they felt pretty sure that, whatever form her " yes " might take, Mrs. Pepperell's " no " would be unmistakable.

So they hoped for the best; and after another

endlessly long period (or so it seemed to them) of talking and writing and waiting, it was actually settled at last, and the Pepperells were going to be back "on the land."

In reality, things had moved very swiftly. It was necessary; for spring was coming, and that is the busiest time on a farm. The Pepperells must be on the spot and settled before spring work began.

But Mrs. Pepperell said — and it was easy to believe her — that she was not one to let the grass grow under her feet when once her mind was made up; and in a remarkably short time her tidy house seemed to the delighted children to be inside out and upside down.

They revelled in the confusion of the packing, and were always eager to accompany their mother when she went out to arrange for moving Grandpa Vance and his books and furniture.

And Mrs. Belden was busy, too, in these days. It was really wonderful how nicely all the smaller

parts of the great plan fitted together. Some of Mrs. Belden's old furniture — the things she had felt most unwilling to part with — was still stored up at the farm, and with the articles which belonged to Mr. Vance would amply furnish the little flat she was to rent when she could find a suitable one within her means.

Mrs. Merington was helpful here also, and they spent several mornings together, driving about from place to place in search of just the right thing at just the right price.

At last an apartment was found which pleased them all.

There was a pretty parlor, a large comfortable room for Grandpa's bedroom and study, a smaller one for Dick; Mrs. Belden was to occupy the dining-room, and they would have their meals in the kitchen, which was unusually large and pleasant for a flat.

This last arrangement seemed to the little girls

especially cosy and attractive, and they cherished strong hopes of being invited there to tea.

Of course they were taking a lively part in all the proceedings, wherever it was possible for them to get their little fingers into the pie.

One day they came to Mrs. Belden with earnest, anxious faces. A new difficulty had arisen — which they stated in the manner which represented Mary's idea of "beginning at the very first beginning."

"Aunt Emily, *do* you like cats?"

"I *love* cats!" she answered, with more animation than she often showed. "I love them dearly. Why?"

"But are you sure you love them when they are big and sleepy, and don't amount to a hill of beans?" persisted Marigold, carefully conscientious. She was too honest to allow dear Aunt Emily to be imposed on by false pretences, even though her own heart was set upon the matter.

"Do you mean Mossy?" inquired Mrs. Belden. She had met Demosthenes by this time, and she recognized the description. "What about him? Isn't Mrs. Pepperell going to take him with her?"

"No," said Mary sorrowfully. "You see she doesn't really love him very much, and she says, lug that elephant a hundred miles in a basket she can't and won't!"

"And the lady who lives next door *would* take him if there wasn't any other way; but you know how fond he and Grampavance are of each other," Marigold hinted.

"Yes, but what could I do with him?" said Mrs. Belden doubtfully, and the hopeful faces fell. "It is no place for pets, in a flat up three flights of stairs. A cat ought to be where he can get out-of-doors, and exercise."

"No, not *this* cat," returned Marigold triumphantly, "for he won't go out,—you can't *get* him to go!"

"Well, to be sure, there's the fire-escape," said Mrs. Belden reflectively; and the anxious faces brightened. "He could sit in the sun and get the fresh air there.

"Anyway, I never would part a full-grown cat from all the people he loves and is used to: it's cruel and wicked!" she added with sudden energy. "If Mossy is not to go with Mrs. Pepperell he must go with Mr. Vance, — that is all there is about it. We will manage somehow."

Mary slipped a coaxing arm about her neck.

"There now, that makes everything perfect! Grampavance will be so much more comf'table with Mossy sitting around. And Mossy will be happy. I know he will love you — because *we* do!" she purred.

So Mossy's cause was won; and the new household now numbered four.

Two of them, Mossy and Grandpa Vance, continued to take the affair very quietly, and

looked on at the bustle of packing and moving as placidly as if it concerned them not at all; but the others, Dick and his new landlady, led busy lives in those next two weeks.

As soon as the new house was secured the next business was to get the furniture into it, and of this Dick took charge. (He said *his* moving could wait — he could bring over his pincushion and tie-box any time the rest were ready.)

He went up to the farm and spent three arduous days packing and shipping the things stored there.

When he came back he reported that it would be a jolly place up there for a summer vacation, but as a winter residence, — well, he agreed entirely with Mrs. Belden.

Mrs. Belden herself spent happy, busy days alone in the flat, cleaning, polishing and arranging the dear, familiar old home belongings. They were old-fashioned and well worn, but still useful and comfortable.

She clung as closely as ever to the little limp, drab shoulder-shawl Dick hated, but in another respect she seemed likely to fulfil his hopes.

"Do you suppose," he had asked Mrs. Merington confidentially, "when she gets settled, all nice and cosy, she will quit looking patient?

"I'll try to stand the shawl, but I *can't* stand people that go around looking patient all the time!"

Mamma Merington only laughed at him (as he loved to make her do), and advised him to try a little patience himself. But privately, she at once began on measures to bring at least one of his wishes to pass.

For Mossy, royal preparations had been made. His warmly lined basket stood ready in a convenient corner, and all the odd saucers that came out of the crates were set aside for his use. Mrs. Belden looked forward with real pleasure to the possession of him.

She even made Dick buy chicken-wire and fence around the fire-escape with it. Not that Mossy was at all the kind of cat who would be apt to lose his head and take a flying leap after doves or sparrows; but she feared lest he should fall asleep (which seemed quite probable) and roll off (which didn't).

At last, when the little home was quite ready, and Mrs. Belden had taken possession, in a state of half-incredulous joy, Mamma Merington drove out to the Pepperells' for Grandpa Vance. She felt herself responsible for her old friend's welfare, and was anxious that his removal should be made as quiet and comfortable as possible.

Of course the little girls wanted dreadfully to go with her on this most important errand; but mamma thought it would be quite exciting enough for Grandpa Vance without them, and besides, she considered that with him, and herself, and his precious manuscripts (which he would

allow no one else to touch) and Mossy, the carriage would be quite full enough.

"Well, Mrs. Merington!" said Mrs. Pepperell, in fervent welcome, "here you are, and I'm thankful *for* it! The old gentleman's been sitting at that window with his hat on for the last hour, and if you hadn't come pretty soon I believe he'd have had a conniption!

"Now, I don't know where you're going to put all these books and things; but he wouldn't have 'em go in the wagon with the furniture, not anyways in the world. And here's Mossy, *he's* going to take up considerable room."

He did, when Mrs. Pepperell had dumped him into the covered market basket, with a handful of catnip (thoughtfully provided by Mary and Marigold to soothe his feelings), poked down his surprised and indignant ears, and shut the cover on him.

But when Grandpa had been comfortably en-

sconced in the carriage, and his possessions packed snugly in around him, Mrs. Pepperell bethought herself of one more thing to put in — and not a small thing either.

"You don't suppose, do you, that Mrs. Belden would like to have my Martha Washington geranium? It's a dreadful handsome plant, — I've had it four winters, and I never saw its beat.

"I hate to leave it, but my land! it would be like trying to move a lilac bush.

"I'll just take two or three slips off it, and then you can tell Mrs. Belden if she wants it she's welcome to it."

"Very well," Mrs. Merington agreed, a little doubtfully however, as she glanced into the carriage, — "cut your slips, and then the plant and Mossy — "

"No," said Mrs. Pepperell firmly, "I don't want no slips off Mossy! Not but what they'd take root fast enough, I make no manner of doubt;

but when I keep a cat again I want a cat that can catch a mouse when it runs over him!"

So Mrs. Pepperell and Demosthenes parted, with small regret on either side.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OASIS

DICK ran up the first two flights of stairs and walked the third, whistling with what was left of his breath, cheerfully but very softly, — for when one lives in a flat one cannot be too careful about keeping up pleasant relations with one's neighbors above and below.

The little household in the flat had been established now for some weeks, but coming home at night had not yet lost its novelty and charm; and Dick never put his latch-key in the door and stepped into the tiny hall without a thrill of satisfaction as he realized the difference between this and Mrs. Frost's boarding-house.

To-night, as he entered, he heard voices in the

parlor; and he stepped quietly across to the half-open door to peep in.

It was a pleasant, homelike little scene he looked in upon, and for a moment he stood silently enjoying it.

It *was* different from the boarding-house, — it certainly was.

The big beautiful lamp which Mamma Merington had called her "house-warming present" made the whole room glow with its soft brightness.

Near it, but with his armchair wheeled around to shade his eyes from the light, Grandpa Vance was taking one of his frequent little naps, his book lying open upon his knees.

Beside the lamp sat Mrs. Belden, busy with the big monograms she was working on Mrs. Merington's new table linen, and seeming not at all incommoded by Mossy, whose fluffy, tawny bulk was stretched all across her lap. He was, to

all appearance, sound asleep, but his deep humming purr filled the room.

And beside Mrs. Belden, her chair drawn close as possible, was another person — a very small person in a pretty blue frock. She also was engaged in needlework, and bent over it in so intent a fashion that her long dark curls bothered her by dropping over her shoulders and getting in her way.

Mary was learning to make buttonholes, and it was necessary to sit close, for she needed her teacher's attention every other minute.

Raising her head to push back the troublesome curls, she caught sight of Dick in the doorway, and sprang up to meet him at the same moment that he spoke.

"Hello, this looks festive," he said. "We've got company, haven't we, Aunt Emily?"

Mary pulled his head down for a kiss, and then danced before him, clasping the button-

holes to her breast, while he pulled off his overcoat.

"Yes, we are company," she said gleefully; "and we are going to stay to supper, and the carriage is not to come till half-past seven, just think!"

"But I don't see 'we.'" Dick objected, trying to look puzzled. "Who else is here?"

"She is coming in a minute," Mary reassured him. "She just ran out to look at her—"

"Sh!" said Marigold, appearing suddenly at the door of the kitchen. "You mustn't tell,—he is to guess. What do you s'pose you are going to have for supper?"

Marigold's arms were bare to her dimpled elbows; she wore Mrs. Belden's morning apron of checked gingham, moving warily to avoid tripping on it, and on the exact tip of her little nose was a dab of flour.

But even without the very plain hint that flour

gave him, it did seem as if Dick might have hit nearer the mark in his guesses than he did, for he knew very well that Marigold's newest and proudest accomplishment was the making of Mrs. Belden's puffy, melting "cream biscuit."

But Dick didn't guess anywhere near that, so he had to wait until supper time to find out.

Presently Mrs. Belden laid aside her work and went to make the tea.

Marigold followed her, filled with anxious responsibility. The oven door was heard to open and close, very gently, and she rushed back with the ecstatic announcement that "they were done just *lovely!*" so everybody went out to supper.

It was as pretty and cosy a dining-room as heart could wish. The kitchen half of the floor was bare, and scrubbed snowy clean, but under the dining-table it was covered with a large square from a former dining-room carpet, — which made

a nice distinction between the kitchen half and the dining half of the room.

In the south window bloomed the beautiful great Lady Washington geranium (the precious pink azalea was in the parlor).

Mrs. Belden's old-fashioned silver made the table bright, and on the stove the shining tea-kettle looked as handsome as though it too were made of solid silver, while its gentle purring made it seem as much one of the family as Mossy himself.

Mossy sat on the floor close beside the table, — very erect, his head a little on one side, and purring his loudest.

He certainly was, as Mrs. Pepperell had called him, a badly spoiled cat, for he ate as many oysters as he could get, hooking them daintily off the fork with a single claw. Mossy loved escalloped oysters.

So did Dick. Dick had his dinners down-town at noon, but Mrs. Belden always had some nice

little hot dish for supper, because she said warm meals were wholesomer for boys.

"Grampavance" ate his supper in gentle, abstracted serenity. Mrs. Belden watched over him, and Dick, and the children, with the same motherly care for all; the little girls chattered happily, and Dick listened and laughed.

It was all very peaceful and cosy.

When supper was over Dick leaned back in his chair, gently rubbing the little yellow head at his side, and smiled across the table at Mrs. Belden.

"This is a big improvement on old times, isn't it, Aunt Emily?" he said. "I declare, I feel dizzy yet, at the suddenness of it all. To get a home and an aunt and a grandfather, all at one stroke, this way, is like one of the twins' 's'poses.' This little flat is a sort of oasis, in a desert of boarding-houses."

Mary pricked her ears at the familiar word. "A little green spot?" she asked, remembering.

"Precisely," Dick answered smiling, remembering too. "A little green spot, — with springs, and camels, and date-palms and all!"

Mary wrinkled her eyebrows in a puzzled way. She saw it was a joke, but she didn't quite see the point.

Then another sentence of Dick's returned to her memory, — that "they were nice pleasant little spots, and everybody liked them;" so she rested content with that, passing over the part that puzzled her as "grown-up funning," which she often found perplexing.

After supper the children made a frolic of helping Aunt Emily do the dishes, while Grandpa Vance returned to his big heavy book and Dick to the evening paper; but instead of reading he spent half the time listening and the other half thinking, with a reflective smile on his lips. "And all owing to their kind little hearts and bright little wits!" he said half aloud, at last.

"THE CHILDREN LISTENED, THEIR WIDE EYES FIXED ON HIS FACE, BUT SEEING ONLY THE BURNING DESERT."

Then the children came romping in, proclaiming that their work was all done, and there was just time for a story before it was time to go home.

They put him in the middle of the comfortable old sofa and settled themselves on either side of him, and Mary decided (Marigold having chosen last time) that the story was to be "about a real oasis."

For a moment the story-teller was baffled. His usual way of telling stories was to give them a very short and simple account of some book he himself had read and enjoyed, and at first he could recall no oasis.

But presently an inspiration came, and he began on "The Talisman;" and for the next half-hour the children listened in eager silence, their wide eyes fixed on his face, but seeing only the burning desert and the terrible Dead Sea, the fountain under its sheltering palms, the splendid horses, and mail-clad knights, and the

clustering tents and banners of the Crusaders' camp.

Grandpa Vance was absorbed in other stories of the past; Mossy dreamed and purred; and Mrs. Belden sat and sewed beside the lamp, in the smooth white apron which she always wore in the evening, — partly because she was brought up that way, and partly because Mossy *would* sit in her lap, whether she wished it or not. *He* wished it, and that was enough.

Mrs. Belden also wore a shoulder-shawl — though often, nowadays, in the warm little house it was laid aside.

But the shawl was not drab now, — Mamma Merington's own hands had made it, and it was of the loveliest seashell pink, as ruffly and dainty as a shawl could possibly be.

It is hard to say whether Mrs. Belden or Dick had felt more grateful for that gift.

Dick's other wish had come true also, for

" Aunt Emily " no longer " went around looking patient." At least, if she did, it was patience of the peaceful, contented, not of the hopeless kind.

At twenty minutes past seven exactly, the children began regretfully to make ready for the carriage, — their thoughts and tongues busy all the while with the wonderful story.

" Did you ever think," said Dick presently, as he struggled with the buttons of Mary's cloak while Aunt Emily fastened Marigold's, " what fun it would be to *make* an oasis? — to dig the well and plant the trees, so tired, thirsty people could stop and drink and rest? "

" Oh-ee, yes," cried Mary, her eyes lighting up at once with this new and delightful suggestion of s'posing.

" And we'd put tents under the trees, to be all ready when the tired people came, — and we could plant grass for the camels to eat — "

" And flowers, to make it pretty," Marigold

chimed in. "What kind of flowers would grow in the desert, Dick?"

Dick pondered, and shook his head. "You have stumped me now," he said.

And then, to their surprise and pleasure, quiet Aunt Emily came to the rescue with a verse from dear old "Lalla Rookh."

> "Our rocks are rough, but smiling there
> The acacia waves her yellow hair,
> Lonely and sweet, nor loved the less,
> For flowering in a wilderness."

The children joyfully accepted the "Arab maid's" suggestion, and an enclosing circle of blossoming shrubbery was immediately added to the grove of palms. And then the carriage came.

All the way home they planned their garden in the wilderness, and when at bedtime they described it to mamma, it was a lovely spot indeed.

They went on s'posing until mamma kissed them good night, and tucked them in and bade

them go to sleep. And Mary's last word before the s'posing turned into dreams was a wistful murmur: "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if we really *could* do such lovely things for people! Do you s'pose children ever can?"

THE END.

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